Université de Montréal

# Reflections of Reflections:

# Authors, Narrators and Worlds Inside and Outside of Autobiographical Fiction

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Résumé de synthèse

*Reflections of Reflections : Authors, Narrators and Worlds Inside and Outside of Autobiographical Fiction* est une étude des relations entre plusieurs éléments inhérents à la fiction autobiographique. Je commence par me pencher sur des notions telles que la subjectivité, la mémoire, la temporalité, la vérité et la fiction, qui ont été longuement approfondies par divers théoriciens des écrits autobiographiques (« life writing ») de la fin du vingtième siècle. Une idée dominante partagée par la majorité d'entre eux est que l'autobiographie suppose la mise par écrit de la conception de soi, et à cette fin, une interprétation précise de l'expérience de sa propre individualité est un atout plus important que la fidélité aux faits.

Après avoir donné une vue d'ensemble de la théorie répandue sur les écrits autobiographiques, j'examine *Tropic of Cancer* de Henry Miller en tant qu'exemple d'une œuvre autobiographique qui anticipe plusieurs éléments de cette théorie. La relation entre le narrateur et son environnement physique et ses amis et connaissances représente un aspect du livre qui ressort dans mon étude. La tendance de Miller à considérer les mêmes événements de plusieurs points de vue à la fois me laisse comprendre que les autres personnages reflètent différentes versions de son expérience individuelle globale. Je prétends que le sentiment de libération qu'éprouve le narrateur à la fin du roman est dû à la célébration de la découverte de sa nature aux multiples facettes, et des possibilités artistiques qui en découlent.

Dans le même ordre d'idées, j'intègre à mon étude une série de courts récits de fiction autobiographique intitulée *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me*. Ces histoires découlent de la conclusion que j'ai tirée de *Tropic of Cancer*, à savoir, que ceux qui écrivent sur leur propre vie ont tendance à définir plusieurs versions d'eux-mêmes,

principalement en relation avec leur environnement. Il en résulte une série de liens entre les auteurs et les narrateurs, des liens qui se tissent d'un monde à l'autre, à la fois à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des œuvres de fiction autobiographique.

Mots clés: écrits autobiographiques, autobiographie, fiction autobiographique, Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

Abstract

*Reflections of Reflections: Authors, Narrators and Worlds Inside and Outside of Autobiographical Fiction* is an investigation of the relationships among many of the elements inherent in autobiographical fiction. I begin by looking at notions such as subjectivity, memory, temporality, truth and fiction, which have been explored at length by various late twentieth-century life writing theorists. One dominant idea shared among most of them is that autobiography entails a conception of oneself on paper, and the accurate portrayal of this experience of selfhood trumps any pretence of biographical fidelity.

After providing an overview of much influential life writing theory, I have looked at Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* as an example of an autobiographical work that anticipates many of these ideas. One aspect of the book which stands out from this investigation is the relationship between the narrator, his physical surroundings, and his friends and acquaintances. Miller's tendency to view singular events from simultaneous points of view has led me to understand that these other characters reflect different versions of his all-encompassing sense of selfhood. I contend that the liberation that the narrator feels at the end of the novel comes from the celebration of his multifarious nature, and the artistic possibilities that arise from this discovery.

Following on this idea, I have included a series of autobiographical-fictional short stories entitled *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me*. These stories follow from the conclusions reached from my discussion of *Tropic of Cancer*: that life writing subjects tend to define the multiple versions of themselves mostly in relation to their environment. The result is a dense series of connections between authors and narrators that weave between worlds both inside and outside of works of autobiographical fiction.

Key Words: life writing, autobiography, autobiographical fiction, Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

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# Introduction

The study of autobiography entails an investigation of a wide variety of writing that gets to the heart of many fundamental issues in literary study. Sometime toward the end of the twentieth century, a shift in intellectual focus allowed for the blossoming of much influential theory relating to autobiography, or life writing. One of the first and most influential theorists of autobiography, James Olney, comments on this swing in critical thought: "The shift of attention from *bios* to *autos*—from the life to the self—was, I believe, largely responsible for opening things up and turning them in a philosophical, psychological, and literary direction" ("Autobiography" 19). Much life writing (and writing about life writing) involves an investigation of self: how it is defined, and how it is created in the process of telling the story of one's own life. Autobiography has come to be seen less as an objective ordering of historical events, and more as a subjective journey into individuals' conceptions of themselves through writing.

Olney led a charge of autobiographical theorists who were unsatisfied with what they felt to be an overly simplistic Cartesian definition of self. Many prominent life writing thinkers base their ideas on the fact that self-awareness alone is not a sufficient criterion for self-definition. The first chapter of this project aims to compare and contrast various theories concerning the creation of self in autobiography, and to look closely at how they move beyond a strictly Cartesian definition. It will provide a definition of autobiography, as well as an examination of some of the ways in which life writing plays with notions of truth, memory, and subjectivity. I will contend that autobiographical writing, when successful, and through its repositioning of subject and

self, manages to fuse many seemingly disparate elements together into one coherent and productive whole.

Chapter two will look at Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* as a work that anticipates many of the notions of selfhood and subjectivity articulated by prominent theorists of autobiography. Working within a framework of life writing theory, I will look at the complicated relationships that take place both inside and outside of the novel: between author and narrator, as well as between the narrator and the other characters. I will examine the extent to which Miller's literary conception of himself exists in relation to his surroundings, and how this effect serves to highlight his sense of exploding consciousness. The conflation of the narrator with the other characters in the novel allows Miller to simultaneously view the same event from multiple, often conflicting, perspectives. He dissolves the poles of interiority and exteriority, and in the process chooses to adopt various positions of *in between.* The multiplicity inherent in the narrator's roving sense of self raises a lot of issues that remain crucial to life writing theory.

Of particular importance to my discussion of *Cancer* will be certain ideas raised in Paul John Eakin's book *How Our Live Become Stories: Making Selves.* Eakin attaches special significance to the physical body, and its relationship to the world around it in individuals' conceptions of themselves. He cites examples of neurological case studies where physical or physiological disorders caused the subject's sense of interior and exterior realities to become muddled and confused. Miller creates a similar effect in *Cancer*, albeit with a distinctly positive attitude. Deleuze and Guattari's theories of the rhizome and the body without organs will also be crucial to my

discussion of Miller. On the characteristics of a rhizome, they write, "it has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills" (*Thousand Plateaus* 21). This idea is enlightening when applied to Miller's character in *Cancer* when we consider the way he rejects any finite ending or beginning in favour of a succession of points in between. The word *milieu* again points to the importance of environment on his conception of himself and his burgeoning sense of explosive awareness.

The fourth chapter of my project is a series of autobiographical-fictional short stories entitled *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me*. While my writing is in not meant to be an imitation of Miller's style, I believe that some of the theories relating to life writing are present in both my work, and my examination of *Tropic of Cancer*. I see my creative contribution as a continuation of some crucial arguments that began to crystallise in my discussion of Miller's work. These include an examination of the multiplicity of selfhood inherent in the genre of life writing, as well as the importance of environment on life writing subjects' conceptions of themselves. The narrator of *Someone*, Jeff, is forced, often reluctantly, to consider situations from different angles, and adopts various personas as a means of dealing with these contrasting points of view. His conception of himself splits off into diverse versions, depending on in which of the other characters are around at the time. Environment, as in *Cancer*, plays a vital role in Jeff's self-image; his revolving cast of *selves* are reflected back at him from other people's eyes, as well as from his physical surroundings. Many of the concepts concerning the multitudinous nature of selfhood which I explore in the first two chapters will be opened up and revisited in the fourth chapter. I hope to provide a contemporary

example of how these theories can be applied to a work of autobiographical fiction. Finally, in *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me* I have attempted to illustrate the discordant elements that tend to bounce off each other in the process of transforming life experience into literature.

# Chapter One

## The Shifting Borders of Autobiography

A good way to begin our investigation is to provide a definition of autobiography. There has been much debate over what exactly constitutes an autobiographical work, with notions of truth, fiction, non-fiction, and historical exactness coming into play. Fortunately, most autobiographical theorists offer a generous view of life writing. Sidonie Smith, in citing ideas put forward by Philippe Lejeune, identifies what I take to be the most important characteristic of life writing: "The convergence of authorial signature and narrator...is a distinguishing mark of life narrative" (8). The simple fact of having the name of the narrator be the same as the author's is a powerful indication to readers that what they are reading is, at least to some degree, an autobiographical work. This aspect is not only limited to the name of the narrator; Lejeune, Smith adds, also considers the similarity of biographical data, (date of birth, geographic location, etc.) as an indication that there is "an implied contract or 'pact'" (Smith 8) between author and reader to the effect that the work is telling the story of the author's life. Barrett J. Mandel expands on this idea by saying that in any autobiography there is an implied sense that "this happened to me" (53). We can combine these two viewpoints to define autobiography as a work where the narrator shares the same name and biographical data as the author, as well as providing some sense that what we are reading actually happened to the person who wrote the text.

This simple definition raises inevitable questions over autobiography's similarities to, and differences from, fiction. How, for instance, does the experience of *reading* autobiography differ from the experience of reading fiction? When we are wrapped up in the reading moment (whether reading autobiography or fiction), is our

disbelief not temporarily suspended to the point where we imagine that what we are reading actually happened?

It is easy to recognize that all fiction contains at least some autobiographical elements, just as much life writing contains fictional elements, making the effort to distinguish between the two quite dizzying. Olney states that the "definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems...virtually impossible, because the definition must either include so much as to be no definition, or exclude so much as to deprive us of the most relevant texts" (*Metaphors* 38-39). Because elements of autobiography and fiction can be found in almost all works that are classified as either, it becomes a next to impossible task to try and tease them apart. To further illustrate the imprecise borders between autobiography and fiction, we only need to consider the hybrid genre of autobiographical fiction. Labelling a text as such implies the freedom to understand that we are reading the account of a life, accented with people, places and events that may not have actually existed. This crossbreeding of genres has made the lines between life writing and fiction much more arbitrary. Similar to Olney recognizing the shifting limits of autobiography, Paul Jay sees no need to rigidly classify a text as one or the other: "the attempt to differentiate between autobiography and fictional autobiography is finally pointless" (16). Again, there are so many elements inherent to both genres, that the inclusion of one work to the exclusion of another can be futile and petty. Jean Starobinski elaborates: "in autobiography or confession, despite the vow of sincerity, the 'content' of the narrative can be lost, can disappear into fiction" (75). In this way, the experience of reading autobiography and fiction can be quite similar. Once we allow ourselves the freedom to include even partly autobiographical works in our definition of

autobiography, we can focus our attention on a more in depth study of the ways in which all of these works traverse the imprecise territory of selfhood.

It would be an oversight, however to say that autobiography, because of its transitory status between truth and fiction, is not a literary genre unto itself. It is precisely the theorist's inability to pin autobiography down into a neat and classifiable genre that sets it apart from other modes of writing. Olney writes, "Autobiography, like the life it mirrors...refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other" ("Autobiography" 24-25). The illusion of truth is a defining characteristic of autobiography that shapes readers' expectations. Perhaps, the difference between autobiography and fiction lies not so much in the moment of reading, but in what readers take away after their first-hand experience of a text. It's not difficult to imagine that readers approach a book that has a higher semblance of historic truth than a purely fictional novel with a greater sense of personal involvement. It is the self-referential nature of the text that provides it with a distinctive place in literary studies:

> We might say, then, that autobiography is neither fictive nor nonfictive, not even a mixture of the two. We might view it instead as a unique, self-defining mode of self-referential expression, one that allows, then inhibits, its ostensible project of self-representation, of converting oneself into the present promised by language. (Renza 295)

According to this definition, autobiography is given the delicate task of creating a self through text, of conceiving oneself in the act of writing. This is far different from biography, in which the goal is to give a historically accurate rendering of events. In life writing, the onus of truth is shifted from the chronological events of a life, to the truthful portrayal of that life on the page. As mentioned earlier, and as will be examined in greater detail below, the idea of accuracy shifts from the *bios* to *autos*.

The feeling that one is left with from these different definitions of autobiography is of a genre without definite boundaries or limitations. The autobiographical text's relationship to the author, the reader, history, and the world around it is one of a growing number of connections and associations: the author, the narrator, and the reader becoming involved in a process of self-discovery. Michael Sprinker, in his essay "The End of Autobiography" writes, "no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text" (342). Autobiography is a genre that defies definition and refuses to be pinned down in one conceptual location, while reaching out and affecting different components of literary study at the same time. In this light, we can imagine that Deleuze and Guattari were referring specifically to autobiography when they wrote that "the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world" (11). This collapsing of borders in the definition of autobiography allows for the possibility a multitude of connections between this kind of writing and the world around it. Once we open the door to this series of associative possibilities, we can begin to see further points of convergence between the different components engaged in the process of autobiography.

Before proceeding with our investigation of the self's evolving place in autobiographical literature, it would be useful to look more closely at notions of truth and subjectivity. Truth itself is a slippery concept, as Nietzsche, speaking of the lines between truth and lies, succinctly puts it, "How arbitrarily these borders are drawn, how one-sided the preference for this or that property of a thing!" (876). The flimsy boundaries separating truth and untruth shift according to individual subjectivity.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith offers a valuable point of view concerning the problems inherent in the notion of a purely autonomous historical truth that exists separately of any fictional re-telling of past events. She writes of the separation of truth and fiction:

> [F]undamental instabilities and incoherences of the classic accounts of truth, knowledge, and language...generate such distinctions: the idea, for example, that certain discourses—notably those of history and, as we would say now, science—offer (at least ideally) direct, objective, and thus properly credible representations of an autonomous reality, or the corollary idea that such discourses are (at least ideally) quite distinct from such manifestly rhetorical and presumptive *non*-credible discourses as poetry and fiction. (24)

For Smith, there is no such thing as a purely objective history that exists outside of the memory of someone's experience of it; no past reality with a clearly defined line between truth and lies. Fiction offers a version of truth that possesses as much, or perhaps more, value than a historical account that pretends to be devoid of subjectivity. She speaks about "the 'truer truth' that is told only, or best, in fiction; the poetry that, in being 'the most feigning,' is also the truest; the poet who, in not telling—or not offering to tell—the truth, cannot lie" (24). Her ideas here are congruent with many life writers, and life writing theorists: that autobiography aims to detail a truth that is more profound and more integral to the experience of a life lived. Writing the story of one's own self entails working on a canvas where the universes of "reality" and fiction are fundamentally tangled.

In discussing notions of truth in life writing, it is important to remember the source of the story being told. The autobiographical writer, even when trying to write as accurately as possible, is always working within the limitations of memory. Mandel elaborates: "I can 'remember' whatever I like about my life and then find as I write my autobiography that the truth which ultimately discloses itself has little to do with these

initial memories" (51). The events of the past can be said to only exist in light of an individual's present recollection of them; we are at the mercy of the erosions of memory and the passage of time. Inevitable gaps in memory must be filled in somehow, either by an unconscious process of "false" remembering, or else by a conscious effort to recreate facts however one wishes to.

There could be different reasons for this deliberately retooled re-creation of events: to make the narrator look more heroic, to save incidental characters undue embarrassment, to get a laugh, etc. The most artistically responsible reason for a conscious misremembering of events would be to create a story that is more engrossing and better written. Georges Gusdorf gives us further insight into autobiographers' conscious decisions to colour their own personal histories with events that would serve to enhance their stories, rather than remaining faithful to the facts. He says about the filling in of gaps in memory with deliberately altered facts:

> [T]hey are not due to purely physical cause nor to chance, but on the contrary they are the result of an option of the writer who remembers and wants to gain acceptance for this or that revised and corrected version of his past, his private reality. (42)

Gusdorf raises an important point here concerning the autobiographical form: that it most frequently takes the form of a search for meaning in writers' lives; the desire to feel that their own personal histories were not chaotic sequences of events, but that each episode brought them closer to some sense of purpose and direction. Life writers, according to Gusdorf, shape the realities of their past in order to infuse these otherwise disconnected events with a sense of meaning. Sidonie Smith adopts a similar point of view concerning memory: "the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering" (16). It is this pulling together of the disjointed events

that make up a life that marks the challenge, and goal, of successful life writing. An exact portrait of events in the way that they actually took place would signify a greater literary failure than simply boring the readers, it would actually give a less realistic impression of the life lived *as seen by itself.*

This self-mythologizing may be contained in one work, or may span entire literary careers including many different works, as in the case of Henry Miller. Olney recognizes the defining myth-making quality of life writing: "It's a myth, you see—a myth intended to convey how it feels to be human, a myth about the subjective experience of *me*" (*Metaphors* 108). Georges Gusdorf has similar ideas regarding the mythologizing nature of autobiography when he writes: "the autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny" (35), and that autobiography "reveals...the effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale" (48). The implication is that we are not presented with narrators simply cataloguing the events of their lives, but, rather, the events of narrators' lives arranged as a struggle to give form to their own selves. The idea of destiny is an intriguing one, if we consider the ultimate destination of life writers' stories in our hands in the form of autobiographical text. Henry Miller, throughout his oeuvre, struggles against economic, social, familial and capitalist forces in order to carve out an identity for himself as an important writer. In his stories, he usually fails in this attempt, while in actual fact, his success as a writer is confirmed by the reader's present consumption of his text.

Autobiographical writers' own memories of the events that make up their lives are altered not only by the passage of time and the aesthetic demands of the story, but also by the process of putting their story down on paper. Olney writes about memory

that "it is reshaped as it is recalled from memory and as it is instantaneously reformulated as words, thence as articulated syntax" (*Memory* 92). The physical act of writing allows the memory to pass through another level of filtration, or articulation. The life writer may remember something in a certain way, but the process of converting that event into a written document will necessarily modify and alter their conceptions of it. Olney's point gets to the heart of all literary theory, in that all good writing should not attempt to be a representation of the world, or the author, or anything, but should create new worlds that have an equal value of truth as anything in the "real" world. Oscar Wilde puts forward this idea when he famously writes, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" (903). The challenge lies in the act of writing, and how the carrying out of this act allows for new forms of expression and thought.

The way that memory affects the action in an autobiographical text produces further connections between the text and the outside world, most notably in the role that time plays in this equation. Olney, in quoting Augustine's *Confessions*, tells us that all notions of present, past, and future in autobiography are necessarily and inextricably linked to now, because that's where we continually exist: "one might perhaps say: 'There are three times—a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future'" (qtd. in *Memory* 3). Memory, and any text that travels to any time in the past or future, is always something that we experience in the present time. "Why should we not take memory for what it richly is—a function of present consciousness—rather than worrying about what it is not, and cannot be?" (Olney, *Metaphors* 264). Besides the fact of present consciousness and the writing act altering the historical souvenirs of writers' lives, it is remarkable how remembering and writing

tie all of these elements to the present. The reader, of course, can only enjoy the book in the present tense, thereby deepening the temporal connections that the autobiographical text establishes.

The setting down of one's own story according to memory brings us to the fundamental movement beyond the Cartesian notion of self that characterizes much autobiographical theory. Olney writes: "The act of autobiography and the act of poetry, both as creation and as recreation, constitute a bringing to consciousness of the nature of one's own existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning" (*Metaphors* 44). The self can be said to exist once it has become conscious of its own consciousness. This amounts to a second level of consciousness that determines and defines the autobiographical form. Olney uses Montaigne as an example to provide an appropriate metaphor: "it is as if Montaigne were to look in a mirror and describe the image of himself looking in a mirror describing...and so on to an infinite replication in consciousness of images of himself within images of himself" (*Metaphors* 81). Another interpretation of Montaigne's autobiographical act sums up a similar idea in a different way: "Montaigne is aware of himself describing himself in the past and is aware that this awareness is his present view on reality—and is aware of this awareness too" (*Metaphors* 44). Both parts of Descartes' equation have become insufficient here: not only does it take more than self-awareness to imply being, but the admission of being in itself opens up a whole new set of implications. In a way, life writing theory takes the simple statement, "I am," and magnifies all the complex associations that are embedded within it. The evolution of concepts relating to the self

has allowed for increasingly in depth scrutiny of this fundamental criterion for existence.

Mandel expands on this thought by saying that consciousness actually acts as a barrier to being aware of who one truly is: "consciousness most often aspires to obscure the truth of one's actual being" (49). Mandel maintains that to truly discover one's self and one's place in the world, it is necessary to go beyond, or beneath, consciousness. To rely solely on the conscious mind is to be deceived about the truth of self. The goal of autobiographical narrators in the creation of themselves through text becomes much more than simply trying to remember what happened to them and when. Mandel elaborates: "Autobiographies, like all works of art, emanate ultimately from the deeper reality of being" (50). The challenge of writing autobiographically, then, becomes the challenge of locating this deeper level of consciousness, of going beyond the obvious self-awareness that humans develop at a very young age. Again, the autobiographical story gains the structure of an individual's search for meaning in life, and how to see beyond the cloud of consciousness to attain a deeper understanding of self.

This seems like an appropriate point at which to turn to Paul John Eakin's contribution to the field of autobiographical theory. Also moving beyond Descartes by referring to a deeper level of consciousness that must be consulted in order to define who we are, Eakin places his focus on the physical body, and its relation to its environment. Concerning how selves are created through writing, he explains:

> [M]y own instinct is to approach autobiography in the spirit of the cultural anthropologist, *asking what such texts can teach us about the ways in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of being "I"*—and in some instructive cases that prove the rule, their sense of not being an "I." (4)

Mandel stated that it is consciousness that promotes the illusion of inner and outer reality (50). Eakin dissects this idea as he looks at examples of individuals whose sense of inner and outer reality became less pronounced or disappeared altogether. Eakin maintains that going beneath consciousness implies breaking down boundaries between self and other; that the physical body is one element of consciousness that clouds our perception of our true selves. The idea that follows from Eakin's book, as will be considered in more detail in the examples of *Tropic of Cancer* and *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me*, is that autobiographical narrators' search for self, if successful, characteristically ends up breaking down the physical barriers separating their sense of inside from outside.

The first relationship in which we can see the boundaries of subject and self melting away is in the one between the autobiographical author and narrator. The popular answer, if authors and narrators share the same name, would be that they are the same person; that authors are merely telling their own stories and their narrators *are* themselves. This view raises a multitude of problems, the most immediate being that the author and the narrator are, quite simply, not the same person. One is a physical being moving around in space, coming into contact with other people and things, making a living, raising a family, paying mortgages, etc. The other is a literary construction, a character in a book. At the same time, however, it would be wrong to assume that life writers and their narrators are two completely separate and individual entities; there must be some points of convergence for these characters who share not only name and biographical data, but most probably preferences, fears, phobias, neuroses, etc.

On the relationship between author and narrator, William L. Howarth introduces an interesting metaphor: "an *autobiography* is *a self-portrait*" (85). Howarth acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between painter and portrait in this equation. He adds: "No longer distinctly separate, the artist-model must alternately pose and paint" (85). Howarth is more concerned here with the process of painting one's self-portrait than with the portrait itself, emphasizing how one and the other must meet on a plane of posing and painting, to connect into one entity of creation. Howarth's proposition is an productive one as it considers not only how the artist affects his creation, but how the creation in turn affects the artist; we can imagine what it would have been like if Dorian Gray had painted his own portrait. Howarth's interpretation of the autobiographical process also points to the second level of consciousness that many theorists maintain is essential for any accurate creation of self through writing. The fact that self-portraitists must also exist as the subjects of their creations reminds us of Montaigne looking at himself looking at himself in the mirror. There exists a series of reflections of self that seems to stretch out to infinity, involving both creator and subject in a process of deepening awareness, and self-discovery.

Other points of connection and separation between the author and narrator lead us again to the ideas of memory and time. Howarth writes: "[The autobiographical writer] works from memory as well as sight, in two levels of time, on two planes of space, while reaching for those other dimensions, depth and the future" (85). It is writers' images of themselves in their memories combined with their physical likenesses that they use to create their self-portraits. Olney also comments on the relationship between writer and narrator in regards to memory: "these two *bioi*, these two lives are

not the same, not by any means; but they *are* significantly joined by what we call memory" ("Ontology" 247). From these commentaries we can imagine that the autobiographical narrator is a version of the author as seen by himself through the lens of his memory. It is easy to see how these two entities are separate, but the process of creation and composition also establishes important connections. The overall impression we are left with is a blurring of boundaries between author and narrator, and an imprecision concerning where one ends, and the other begins.

If we accept Howarth's notion of autobiography as a kind of self-portrait, we can begin to conceptualize the different ways that people, and artists especially, can conceive themselves. Stephen Spender comments on the dual sources that influence autobiographers' conceptions of themselves: "when he considers the material of his own past...he is confronted not by one life—which he sees from the outside—but by two" (116). These two lives include the way he is seen by other people, his social and economic position, public character, etc., and the way he sees himself. Sidonie Smith shares a similar opinion: "In life narrative people write about their own lives...simultaneously from externalized and internal points of view" (4-5). The life writer must fuse these two differing views of himself into one coherent and whole character in his work. Just as life writers tend to fill in the gaps of their memories with versions of events that lend meaning to their lives, so too do they often present a version of themselves as they would like to be seen. In Louise DeSalvo's comments in her introduction to *Tropic of Cancer*, for example, she says that Henry Miller portrays of himself as rough, tough and misogynistic, while in Anaïs Nin's work he is portrayed as tender, and respectful. Desalvo explains that "her portrait is nothing like the tough-

minded persona of *Cancer*, and suggests that Miller's creation was largely compensatory" (Introduction, xiii). Perhaps life writers are confronted not by two lives, but by three, the third being the way they hope to be seen by others, by correcting any aspects of their character that feel deficient.

And if the life writer is confronted by three lives, why not more? Taking into consideration how many different people and situations the life writing subject is confronted with, the self that is defined by how other people see it begins to multiply. How we view ourselves, as well, is something that is in constant flux, scarcely remaining consistent for very long. Perhaps the way life writing subjects hope they are seen by others is the most consistent of these three versions of self, but it becomes easy to imagine all three adopting variations, with the entire organism of selfhood growing exponentially. In any case, it is impossible to accurately tease apart which parts of autobiographical narrators are drawn from interior experience and which are drawn from exterior sources. The narrator remains, to varying degrees, a point of convergence between a growing number of potentially conflicting viewpoints. We are left with proliferation of selves playing off each other and connected to the universes both inside and outside of the autobiographical text.

Olney uses the case of Rousseau's *Dialogues* to further complicate the relationship between author and his literary likeness. Olney explains that Rousseau includes multiple versions of himself in this book, under a few different names: "J.J", "Rousseau," and the "Frenchman." Olney questions the ontological and literary status of these three similarly named (J.J. and Rousseau especially) characters, in relation with the "real" Rousseau. The issue is complicated by the fact that the characters refer to the

writer Rousseau inside the work itself, setting up an interesting post-modernist literary point of convergence between all of them. Olney articulates the confusion that results from trying to tease these entities apart:

> When a character of fiction—so indicated by the conventional use of quotation marks, "Rousseau," to signify a character whose existence is solely fictional, lying entirely within the covers of a book—reaches outside the fiction and the book to refer to his creator and the author of the fiction by his historical name, which appears, of course, on the title page, when the author becomes a creature of his own created character, then how many sets of single and double quotation marks do we have to put around the name and the ontological status of the author-creature-of-his-own-creature? Is it "Rousseau," "'Rousseau,'" or "'"Rousseau"'? (*Memory* 151)

The implication from Olney's intricate construction is that life writers and their namesake narrators are linked in deep and ineffable ways, and trying to find out exactly where one ends and the other begins is an exhausting undertaking. They are consequently the same, and not the same, for reasons that are only known to life writers and their creations, if at all. Like the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, and between interiority and exteriority, the one between life writers and their narrators is equally difficult to pin down.

Further associations can be drawn by examining the content of autobiographical texts themselves. Paul de Man, citing the example of Rousseau's *Confessions*, points to a binary of truth and lies that exists inside the text: "In the deviousness of the excuse pattern, the lie is made legitimate, but this occurs within a system of truth and falsehood that may be ambiguous in its valorization but not in its structure" (287). The "Rousseau" of the text makes excuses for his theft of the ribbon, making it hard for the other characters, and the reader, to know whether or not he is telling the truth. On another level, in this autobiographical text, the reader may begin to wonder at the truth

of the facts as they are stated by the author Rousseau: whether he is embellishing events as they happened to make himself look less guilty, more sympathetic, etc. A noteworthy parallel then develops between the problems that the life writer is trying to work out in the text, and with which those that the narrator is confronted.

Citing the example of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Paul Jay states that "in the self-reflexive literature of the period in question the problem of the subject as an ontological construct is always conflated with the problems that the autobiographical subject is seeking to both depict and resolve in his text" (22). The autobiographical narrator is usually on a mission to locate some kind of meaning in life, and tie all of the disjointed events of that life together into a satisfying whole. The congruencies to authors' questioning of their own ontological positioning in the world are impossible to ignore. While in fiction we might view the writer-narrator relationship as one of subject and object, in autobiography it is closer to one of subject and subject. Due to the multiple selves inherent in a work of life writing, we might even say it is one of subject and subject and subject and subject, *ad infinitum*.

The placing of the subject on both sides of the literary divide is one of the strongest ways that autobiography makes connections between itself and the outside world. This contribution automatically makes the author, narrator, text, and reader all seem like related parts in a continual engine of art and experience. All notions of interiority and exteriority become blurred and collapse into each other. Olney, speaking of Montaigne, says that he "makes his life the subject of his autobiographical art, and then steps outside the ring, being now both inside and outside the process, to make his art the subject of both his life and his art" (*Metaphors* 81). This idea leaves us with the

image of the author, present in the work itself, looking out at us, the so-called spectators. This is similar to Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, where we see the painter depicted in the scene, staring back at the person appreciating the painting: "We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him" (Foucault 6). *Las Meninas* is not a self-portrait, because we can see the artist surrounded by entire scene of which he is only a part. It is pertinent to the present study because it places the artist as the subject in an environment that contextualizes his position *vis-à-vis* himself, his art, the audience, and his surroundings. In fact, the painter figure in *Las Meninas* is not even the central figure in the scene, but somewhat off to the side. The composition of the painting becomes interesting to consider alongside *Tropic of Cancer*, as Miller also places himself not exactly in the middle of the action, but slightly off to the side, observing the wild movements of his friends. *Las Meninas* is an intriguing example of an awareness of self-awareness that anticipates many recurring themes in the field of autobiographical theory. The artist becomes an intrinsic part of his creation, reversing the order of subjectivity found in fiction and other less self-reflexive art forms.

Other theorists have commented on the different positions that subject and object hold in life writing. The general consensus is that autobiography entails a conflation of subject and object, a falling into each other, a collapsing of borders. Sidonie Smith writes that "the [life] writer becomes, in the act of writing, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation" (1). Howarth comments upon a similar merging of subject and object when he writes: "part and whole, self and others, must merge even though diametrically opposed" (113). It

follows that if subject and object can merge, so too can self and other, and similarly oppositional concepts. This opens the possibility in life writing of a blurring of boundaries not only between the author and the narrator, but the narrator and other characters within the text. It becomes easier and easier to consider the relative composition of life writing subjects—how their conception depends almost entirely on environment, community, and surrounding characters. The multiplicity of selfhood becomes more and more necessary as autobiographical narrators find themselves defined in constant relation with those around them.

To return to Eakin's contribution to the study of the subjectivity and the self in life writing, we must again shift our focus to the role of the physical body. In *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Eakin begins with a study of multiple examples of people whose sense of self was linked directly to their bodies. Conversely, many of these subjects suffered a loss of their sense of selfhood when confronted with a disconnection from their own physicality. He cites various prominent neurologists and therapists and writes how they all agree that "any attempt to remodel our concepts of the subject, self, or consciousness...requires a return to the body, undoing the original Cartesian exclusionary move" (9). Quoting neurologist Israel Rosenfield he states that "the body...is the brain's absolute frame of reference" (qtd. in Eakin 19). In another example, Eakin writes that "there is widespread evidence in biography and autobiography today that living as bodies figures centrally *for both men and women* in their sense of themselves as selves" (37). Eakin seems to be one of the only theorists working in the field of autobiography that places such a high emphasis on the role of the body in individuals' conception of themselves as subjects in the world. As soon as these

capacities are put in question, the subjects lose their defining sense of individuality. As we will see in *Cancer*, this frightening loss of bodily contour can become an essential step in life writing subjects creating the myth of their existence, and infusing their lives with meaning.

Taking the conflation of subject and object to a whole other level, Deleuze and Guattari offer a revolutionary stance on these two seemingly disparate entities in their construction of the rhizome. Arguing for the interconnectedness of all things leaves them no room for a pair of opposing standpoints. Their solution, rather than bringing subject and object together, is to obliterate them completely: "The binary logic of dichotomy has simply been replaced by biunivocal relationships between successive circles" (*Thousand Plateaus* 5). In their principles of multiplicity, they write: "A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions" (*Thousand Plateaus* 8). On the idea of the author's relationship to the narrator who shares his name, the following seems curiously appropriate: "There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying" (*Thousand Plateaus* 10). Deleuze and Guattari's ideas, when examined through the lens of life writing theory, leave the door open to acknowledge the multiplicity of selves that make up autobiographical texts. "Biunivocal relationships between successive circles" seems like a very appropriate was of describing the autobiographical subject's place in the universe of its book, and beyond. The relational nature of life writing subjects moves beyond the author-narrator dichotomy towards a more rhizomatic structure. Both author and narrator are made up

of different versions of themselves that are in constant movement, defined by their position *vis-à-vis* their surroundings at any given moment. For Deleuze and Guattari, the author, text, and reader all exist on a simultaneous plane of existence, connected to each other in multiple and incalculable ways, each component affecting itself and every other part of the rhizomatic world to which it is attached.

It becomes easy to imagine how autobiography works in a more rhizomatic rather than arborous fashion. Subject, object, self, other, author, narrator, text and reader assume varying positions that touch and affect each other. The entire construction of a self through life writing can be seen as a search for connections between potentially diverse components, in an effort to supplant one's existence with a sense of purpose. The more life writers break down boundaries between themselves and their work, as well as the narrators, memories, others, and the world around them, the closer they get to their goal of tying together their lives into one coherent whole.

# Chapter Two

## "The Me and the Not-Me":

## Dissolving the Boundaries of Interiority and Exteriority in *Tropic of Cancer*

Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* blends many of the different components of life writing together into a chaotic and influential work of autobiographical fiction. *Cancer* documents Miller's ebullient existence in Paris at the beginning of the 1930's; a vagabond lifestyle of late nights, desperate friends, and an abundance of near-anonymous sexual encounters. What Miller hopes to put forward in the explosive pages of the book, however, is a version of truth that moves beyond the triviality of fact. He is concerned instead with presenting a wide scope of human experience—to reveal the multifarious ways in which different events can be simultaneously viewed and assimilated. His work introduces a lot of ideas concerning the creation of selves in literature, and the relationship between elements inside texts and those in the "real" world. *Cancer* revolves around an important component of life writing which was articulated sixty-five years later by Paul John Eakin, "*all* identity is relational" (Making Selves 43). Miller's understanding of himself as an artist depends largely on his relationship to both the physical location of Paris and his roving spectrum of friends and acquaintances. The creative explosion that Miller experiences in the novel is tied in with his growing understanding of his place in an increasingly disorderly universe.

Building on the framework for autobiography outlined in the previous chapter, I will examine how Miller manages to create this sense of belonging inside a frequently hostile world. The most crucial way this is achieved is by breaking down the borders separating interiority from exteriority. In challenging the oppositional nature of these two positions, Miller succeeds in condensing the boundaries between himself and those around him. Starting with *Tropic of Cancer*, he managed to bring about important

innovations in a genre where "boundaries of...concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text" (Sprinker 342). By turning the world inside out, Miller forces us to consider the relative nature of such elements as: fact and fiction, self and other, and author and narrator, among others. One remarkable characteristic of *Cancer* is how its narrator manages to simultaneously consider conflicting ideas, and to produce a feeling of acceptance in a universe that has fallen into disorder. This coming together of potentially oppositional elements is one characteristic of life writing that is often mirrored in its content. The way in which Miller rubs contrasting ideas, people and places together helps create the feeling of self-enlightened intoxication that sets *Tropic of Cancer* apart as unique and lasting work of autobiographical fiction.

Autobiography's relationship to notions of truth, memory and temporality are some of the important ideas Miller wrestled with that would eventually be taken up by such life writing theorists as Eakin, James Olney, Georges Gusdorf, and Sidonie Smith, among many others. As James Decker observes, "Olney, like Miller, comprehends that the order and meaning a text extracts from experience lie not in the events themselves but in the writer's mind" (61). The energy of the book stems from the multiple perspectives that it puts forward. What remains vital is not necessarily the action itself, but the narrator and other characters' attitudes towards it. This chapter will also explore Miller's influence on the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, and how their ideas can in turn help us further understand what he accomplished in *Cancer*. The most notable parallel between these writers lies in how individuals' contemplation on the machinations of the world brings them closer to an understanding of themselves. Finally, in composing a work that reflected the chaos of the world from which it was

conceived, Miller capably creates a book that resonates with the full spectrum of human experience.

## Truth, Fiction, and Consciousness

The Emersonian epigraph succinctly sums up Miller's vision of the role of truth in his autobiographical romances. It points to the subjective recounting of one's own personal history that has become the identifying mark of life writing: "These novels will give way, by and by, to diaries and autobiographies—captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experience that which is really his experience, and how to record truth truly" (*Journals* 516). The last phrase is particularly striking, and reminds us of Barbara Hernstein Smith's idea of the "truer truth" (24) that can best be found in fiction or poetry. For Smith, Emerson, and Miller, the most truthful texts are those that do not feign the pretence of objectivity, but rather celebrate the deeper truth that emanates from the artist's subjective mind. The past becomes a blank canvas that can be filled in most truthfully by the skilled hand of the creative individual. It also signals the importance of the writers who are able to put forward this type of captivating book: ones who can paint portraits of themselves that resonate with the reality of every day experience. In the book that follows, Miller takes up the challenge laid out by Emerson, and—in this desire to put forward his desperate human truth—manages to create a work that straddles the imprecise line between truth and fiction.

Miller, on many occasions, delineates his philosophy of truth, and how he contemplated the relationship between factuality and his work. Distortion of events as

he remembered them was simply part of the creative process: "I lie occasionally—why not? My lying is in keeping with giving the truth about myself. It is not a machine that is registering this record of a soul, but a human being, and I am putting myself forward first and foremost *as a human being*" (*Nin and Miller* 42). Throughout Miller's oeuvre he recreates the history of his life in order to fabricate his own personal myth, and translate his existence into one pregnant with meaning and importance. Regarding the autobiographical form, Miller writes:

> It is not a mixture of truth and fiction, this genre of literature, but an expansion and deepening of truth. It is more authentic, more veridical, than the diary. It is not the flimsy truth of facts which the authors of these autobiographical novels offer but the truth of emotion, reflection and understanding, truth digested and assimilated. The being revealing himself does so on all levels simultaneously. (*Books* 169)

Blurring the lines that divide truth from fiction opens up a space through which Miller's human truths can be recognized. It is also significant that he places emphasis on emotional truth, which is only realized when two opposing ideas are "digested and assimilated." Miller is again pointing towards a mixture of contrasting positions as the key for revealing "truth." The co-mingling of truth and fiction leads to the slightly ambiguous sentence that closes out this quote, one that is crucial to Miller's philosophy. For Miller, successfully carrying out his brand of autobiographical fiction signifies the ability to reveal conflicting truths simultaneously, and concurrently looking at events from a multitude of perspectives. In *Cancer*, he succeeds in revealing various levels of *his selves*, all at the same time, by continually contrasting his own character with the people and places by which he is surrounded.

There are numerous references in the text of *Cancer* that delineate Miller's refusal to accept truth and fiction as two separate and independent poles. Right from the

beginning the narrator warns us "This is not a book, in the ordinary sense of the word" (2). It is not a book in the sense that its author is not choosing to write either an autobiography or a novel. Miller prefers instead to drop out of the pretence of literature altogether: "I don't use 'heroes,' incidentally, nor do I write novels. I am the hero, and the book is myself..." (qtd. in Wilson 93). Truth and subjectivity meet in a work of art that attempts to breathe with as much life as its real-life composer. Again, in *Cancer*: "Between me and the machine there is no estrangement. I am the machine..." (28). The similarities between the two preceding quotes is striking, right down to the ellipses that succeed both of them, leading us from the words on the page out to the world that exists beyond: "[t]he treadmill stretches away to infinitude" (*Cancer* 182). Miller uses ellipses generously throughout *Cancer*, continually giving us the feeling of the sentence trailing off into infinitude, and further breaking down boundaries between universes of the book and the one outside of it. "For Miller, art and artist function harmoniously...[he] announces his intention to dissolve the artistic boundaries between subjectivity and truth" (Decker 64). This raises further interesting points of connection between the literary world and the "real" one. The blurring of the lines dividing interiority from exteriority creates ever-expanding connections between both worlds.

One idea that is relevant to the notions of truth raised in *Cancer*, has to do with the way in which life writers manage to reach deeper levels of self-understanding. In chapter one, we saw how life writers attempt to go beyond Cartesian notions of self-awareness, and how consciousness is seen as a barrier towards enlightenment: "It is everyday consciousness that 'naturally' separates inner from outer reality, thus falsifying existence" (Mandel 50). The narrator of *Cancer* seems to be searching for

this layer of consciousness which exists beneath the surface. There are numerous references to scratching: "I want the whole world to be out of whack, I want everyone to scratch himself to death" (12). And to what is beneath the skin: "I see people scratching themselves frantically, scratching and scratching until the blood comes" (71). This tearing away of skin can be seen as a desire to get beneath the surface of consciousness, in order to get closer to more important versions of truth. What lies beneath, ultimately, is not an esoteric philosophy of ideas, but blood and guts. The scratching serves to have another effect, conversely showing the insensitivity of those reduced to living like animals in a constant state of disease.

The squalor in which the narrator finds himself, due to his lack of employment, and consequent lack of responsibility, is one of the main ways in which he attains a deeper level of understanding: "The 'deadness' of the narrator...creates a consciousness freed from public existence, from 'life' in that sense" (Woolf 168). He does his best to drop out of the capitalist machine which has imprisoned America, and to a lesser extent, Europe. The ultimate futility of this exercise is not lost on the narrator, as can be seen when he reluctantly takes part in one particular sexual encounter with Van Norden and a prostitute. He recognizes the phoniness of the whole situation, but feels powerless to remove himself from it. The whole time, he keeps returning to the fifteen francs that the woman has been promised, a small sum of money that keeps the progression of the scene inevitable:

> [T]here's the fifteen francs and something has to be done about it...there's fifteen francs somewhere, which nobody gives a damn about any more and which nobody is going to get in the end anyhow, but the fifteen francs is like the primal cause of things and rather than listen to one's own voice...one surrenders to the situation. (142)

The narrator's conflicted relationship to money remains at the foreground of much of the action and the lengthy diatribes that make up the novel. Miller celebrates his non-reliance on the shackles of job and family, yet at the same time longs for enough comfort to be able to produce the important book that is gestating inside of him. "How the hell can a man write when he doesn't know where he's going to sit the next half-hour?" (32), he complains. He develops an ingenious plan to bum dinner from a different friend each evening, but this plan comes about as a result of his almost constant thinking about food. The feeling we are left with is that the deeper level of consciousness that Miller strives toward can only be attained by recognizing the full spectrum of the human being's predicament in the world, and by surrendering to the contrasting forces that shape the reality of experience.

The narrator's position in the world of money that he feels both liberated from and imprisoned in also allows for the insertion of the numerous dream and fantasy sequences that lead him ever closer to truth (Woolf 168). The text moves freely between present and past narrative and surreal dream-like sequences. The two are often meshed together in the same scene so that it becomes difficult to properly locate where "reality" ends, and dream begins: "Often between the dream and reality there is 'only the thinnest line'" (Hoffman 48). The reader inevitably must question whether some events are happening in real or dream-time, resulting in a more pronounced questioning of the borders between truth and fiction. Dream becomes another place where Miller locates a deeper level of subjective truth: "Through dreams, Miller appears at irregular intervals to tunnel beneath he surface of reality" (Decker 71). The truth that the narrator finds in these dream sequences is one of an equally decaying and diseased world, where

sexual encounters are just as impersonal and emotionless as in waking reality. These are not dreams of a better or more comfortable world, but rather complementary comments on the cultural and social impoverishment that pervades both spaces.

During the same sequence in which the narrator is watching Van Norden unsuccessfully "tackle" a prostitute, an exchange which he likens to both a state of war and the automation of factory machines, he remembers a dream of Van Norden in exactly the same situation of fruitless copulation. He writes, "Everything is just the same as it was before; the elements are unchanged, the dream is no different from the reality" (145). That may be so, but the dream leads us to a greater understanding of reality, and only with a firm consideration for both, can we hope to attain any honest level of truthfulness. Miller does not explicitly lay out when he is functioning in dream-mode versus waking consciousness; they are merely two sides to the same coin of existence.

Still, we can often recognize when the narrator slips into moments of reverie as they contain a heightened sense of surrealism. While it would be imprecise to label *Cancer* a work of surrealist writing, it is evident that Miller was influenced by surrealist films and Dadaist art. He admits, for example, his admiration for a book called *A Man Cut in Slices* (*Cancer* 39) which references an actual surrealist text that was circulating in Paris at this time (*Letters to Emil* 28). The dream sequences in *Cancer* adopt surreal qualities, such as the Van Norden dream referenced above:

> He is about to walk away when suddenly he notices that his penis is lying on the sidewalk. It is about the size of a sawed-off broomstick. He picks it up nonchalantly and slings it under his arm. As he walks off I notice two huge bulbs, like tulip bulbs, dangling from the end of the broomstick, and I can hear him muttering to himself "flowerpots…flowerpots."
> (126-27)

Many of the dreams in *Cancer* deal with bodies in various states of dismemberment, or undergoing other distortions similar to the types that could be found in the new art surfacing in early 1930's Paris. One principle which Miller seems to have picked up from Cubism and Dada is the immediacy of looking at a single event from multiple perspectives. It was one important way in which he allowed being to reveal itself on all levels simultaneously, and to string together the more chaotic elements of the book. The border between the universes inside and outside of the book once again becomes blurred through Miller's descriptions of his cohorts' body parts laying strewn about his bloody canvas, some of them on one side of the line dividing fantasy from waking reality, and some on the other. The impression we are left with is that none of the selves in the book are whole or complete, but existing in pieces, and assuming different shapes depending on time and circumstance.

Temporality is another dimension that Miller reconfigures in *Cancer* for the purposes of injecting his book with as much direct humanity as possible. Eruptive jumps in time make up the shapeless form of the novel; it is written mostly in first-person, present tense narrative, but it often shifts to past reminiscence—or dream sequences—sometimes in mid-sentence. The effect of these shifts in verb tense is to further disorient the reader, leaving them open to the effect of the explosive "bombination" of words. The shifts in tense give the book a strong oral, storytelling style. We are warned of the oral nature of the tale being told near the beginning, with the famous phrase of Borowski: "*Your anecdotal life!*" (3). The goal of this temporally unstable text is to break through literary boundaries and to reach the reader's consciousness "direct as a knife thrust" (Miller, *Letters to Emil* 72). Miller writes, "No

past, no future. The present is enough for me. Day by day. Today! *Le bel aujourd'hui!*" (*Cancer* 50). The boundaries between past, present and future become another set of borders that Miller wishes to dissolve and move beyond. Life becomes a series of perceptions that are framed by a continuously present reality, which is related by a narrator who becomes increasingly intoxicated with the explosiveness of living.

Miller rejected any valuation of chronological time in his narratives, replacing it with a version of time that moved more congruently with the patterns of his own mind. James M. Decker, in his book *Henry Miller and the Narrative Form*, expounds on Miller's manipulation of temporality and how he developed his own personal organization of it, one which Miller himself termed "spiral form." Working towards a definition of spiral form, Decker writes, "Miller explodes the linear and replaces it with a flexible temporality capable of doubling or tripling back on itself" (7). The flexibility of the temporal in *Cancer* is crucial to the evolution in consciousness that it creates. Decker goes on to say, "spiral form approaches evolution not in terms of nodes on a continuum, but in terms of an intricate associative pattern that returns again and again to the same individual event from a variety of perspectives" (8). We are reminded again of Miller's description of his artistic vision: "The being revealing does so on all levels simultaneously" (*Books* 169). Anaïs Nin has written about Miller. "He writes as we think, on various levels at once, with seeming irrelevance, seeming chaos" (*Henry and June*, 11). The narrative of *Cancer* follows the rhythms of Miller's exploding artistic consciousness, thereby replicating consciousness itself, instead of a strained literary ideal. Spiral form has no beginning and no end, and allowed Miller the freedom to move from idea to idea in his books in a way that a more linear chronological movement

of time would never be able to. Again we can see many of the intricacies of the book summed up in the first few pages: "The cancer of time is eating us away…The hero, then, is not Time, but Timelessness".(1). The reaction against this cancer of time, is not to hang on to antiquated ideals of precision, but to celebrate its dissolution:

> It is the twenty-somethingth of October. I no longer keep track of the date. Would you say—my dream of the 14th November last? There are intervals, but they are between dreams, and there is no consciousness of them left. The world around me is dissolving, leaving here and there spots of time. The world is a cancer eating itself away…When into the womb of time everything is again withdrawn chaos will be restored and chaos is the score upon which reality is written. (2)

It is chaos, not order, which leads to enlightenment. The loss of linear temporality in the book mirrors that of the universe; *Cancer* exists as another product of a diseased and decaying world. An absence of a chronological time-sense becomes another crucial component in the simultaneous presentation of different versions of reality; Miller manages to get all these impressions across in one seemingly prolonged present moment.

**Reflection: How Miller is Made**

One aspect of life writing that was discussed in the first chapter that is relevant to our understanding of Miller's work is the relationship between author and narrator. Despite Miller's insistence that he didn't use heroes, and that there is nothing separating his books from himself, the relationship between himself and his namesake narrator is somewhat more complicated. The simple fact that Miller admitted to exaggerating the historical episodes of his life in his work implies that there was nothing holding him

back from exaggerating his own character. Testimonies from Miller's friends lead us to believe that the portrayal of Miller as some kind of unflinching sexual dynamo, for example, may have been less than precise. Anaïs Nin has said, "I believe in Henry's humanness, although I am fully aware of the literary monster" (*Henry and June*, 271). Long-time friend Erica Jong writes, "he was never as profligate as the narrator seems to imply" (117). Biographer Jay Martin consolidates these accounts: "At the time of his writing [*Tropic of Cancer*] the main character of the book and Miller were not at all identical" ("Last" 81). Miller, himself, admits to the discrepancies between himself and his literary creation. Again, the most discernable difference lies in their sexual proclivities. Miller wrote to Anaïs Nin, "It is true I swim in a perpetual sea of sex but the actual excursions are fairly limited" (*Nin and Miller* 31), and in an interview with George Belmont says, "The truth is that I even feel a bit shy with women" (78). As mentioned in the first chapter, though retaining important similarities, authors and their namesake narrators are, in fundamental ways, not the same being. It would be a mistake to confuse the two as sharing exactly the same values, opinions, and personalities.

The relationship between writer and narrator is a theme that is explored in the text itself. Near the beginning of *Cancer* Miller writes, "I have moved the typewriter into the next room where I can see myself in the mirror as I write" (5). This passage resonates on various levels, as we see Miller confronted by a version of himself, mediated by the act of writing. This passage shows the extent to which Miller is creating his own persona through the process of composition. Miller's movements affect the image in the mirror, and vice-versa, while both versions of self meet and mutate into something else in the narrative. The impression we are left with is the

centrality of the act of writing itself; the importance of the present moment of creation to Miller's conception of his literary alter ego.

We are presented with a double version of Miller here, and this scene's inclusion near the beginning of the book set us up for the contention that if there can be two versions of Miller, then there can be three, or four, and so on. Olney's description of Montaigne which we saw in the first chapter becomes increasingly relevant: "it is as if Montaigne were to look in a mirror and describe the image of himself looking in a mirror describing...and so on to an infinite replication in consciousness of images of himself within images of himself" (*Metaphors* 81). This is precisely what Miller is doing in this passage, and the amount of reflections of himself that he sees stretches off to infinity, traversing the space between the book and the outside world: "[t]he treadmill stretches away to infinitude" (*Cancer* 182). The fact that he is referring to his present act of composition deepens the impression that we are looking at a spectrum of selves stretching across all ontological spheres. Stephen Spender's idea on the different selves that the life writer is faced with can help us understand how Miller treats this multiplicity of identity: "All these [selves] are real to him as, say, his own image in a mirror" (116). We can imagine that while in moments of artistic creation Miller became lost in these multifarious versions of himself, and the magnetic interplay between them helped infuse the book with exuberance and energy. The inter-connected relationships between these selves create a dense web of concords and discords, fusing the chaotic movements of the book into one, strangely unified, autobiographical novel. It becomes increasingly difficult to determine which versions of Miller exist in which world; they

all tend to intermingle, coming together and falling apart like the bodies to which he devotes so much space and time.

The backdrop of Paris is presented as a kind of mirror through which the characters can dream up versions of themselves. Speaking of the Seine Miller writes, "All along the banks the trees lean heavily over the tarnished mirror" (6). The city is blemished, flowing with disease, war-like sex and dehumanizing poverty, and it is in this decaying environment through which Miller presents himself, nakedly and honestly. In this fragmented space, the characters are presented as possessing multiple, often conflicting selves. Van Norden complains: "It's like I'm two people, and one of them is watching me all the time" (130). This statement seems to ring true for Miller as well, for he seems aware of the separation between his "real" selves and his literary creations, and the act of writing exists as an attempt to bridge the gap between them: "He always thought of his narratives as a means of comprehending his place in the cosmos and destroying the barriers between self and text" (Decker 60). The self in *Cancer* is put forward as something that exists in tatters, and only through a sustained effort of concentration can Miller hope to put it together into a coherent whole.

The narrator, as well as the other characters in *Cancer*, are presented as composites of their friends and accomplices, which leads the reader to believe that Miller is wrestling more with a multiplicity, rather than a mere duality, of selfhood. The way in which the narrator switches between descriptions of Carl and Van Norden make it difficult at times for the reader to decipher who exactly he is talking about. The fact that Miller's entourage is made up of aspiring and failing writers further strengthens the compositional nature of the narrator in regards to his environment. When describing

Borowski he writes, "We have so many points in common that it is like looking at myself in a cracked mirror" (9). Directly following this, when talking about his own manuscript, the narrator states, "It is so much like Moldorf" (9). The amount of time that Miller devotes to describing his friends in such minute detail leads us to believe that he is in a way defining himself, positively or negatively, through their speech, sexual preoccupations, and action (or lack thereof). It becomes easy to recognize how all of the characters in the book function to give us a stronger impression of Henry Miller, and all of the conflicting components therein.

Decker introduces the notion of a "supraself" in Miller's writing, a version of self without any clearly defined borders and one that encompasses Miller the writer and Miller the narrator, as well as bits and pieces from the ubiquitous surrounding cast of characters. He writes that this definition of the supraself in relation to others is one characteristic of the form Miller is working in: "In *Tropic of Cancer*, Miller employs anecdotes far more than the other modes, a strategy that reflects his tendency in spiral form to characterize the supraself from his relations with unliberated individuals and artistic poseurs" (67). Decker brings up of the significance of the title of *A Man Cut in Slices*, and we are also reminded of the reveries where Miller imagines his cohorts' body parts separated from their bodies. Miller and his friends even share one nickname, underlining a certain interchangeability in their characters: "Everybody is Joe because it's easier that way" (102). The impression we are left with is of characters without any finite beginnings or endings, shades of one blending into the rest. Paul John Eakin stresses the importance of a surrounding environment on individual's conceptions of themselves: "autobiography criticism has not yet fully addressed the extent to which the

self is defined by—and lives in terms of—its relations with others…*all* identity is relational" (43). In a text where the boundaries between truth and fiction, past and present, and author and narrator have already begun to break down, we can also recognize a dissolution of the limits between self and other, between where one character ends and another begins. The space between individuals begins to condense and become less pronounced. Deleuze and Guattari, declare that in acentered systems that make up rhizomorphic structures "all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their *state* at a given moment" (*Thousand Plateaus* 17). We are once again brought back to the important of time, and a present moment in the construction of literary selves. Identity can change at different moments in time, depending with who and what it is surrounded. Not only are people's personal histories blank canvases, but so are their visions of their own selves, to be coloured in by the influences of those around them. Reflection is not limited to one's own image in glass, but also in the glassy wetness of other people's eyes.

## Condensing the Boundaries of Flesh

A major way that selves are constructed in *Tropic of Cancer* is through references to the physical body, and its relationship to other bodies around it. Sex is equated with creativity; those who are portrayed as sexually liberated are also shown to be the most artistically unchained: "Miller demonstrates that in giving free rein to those passions, the supraself injects the other areas of his existence—including his art—with a renewed vigor" (Decker 67). The overwhelming sense of autonomy that Miller

experiences in *Cancer*—the one which provides him with the ability to be able to create the book itself—is tied in with the sexual freedom that allows the narrator to participate in the numerous near-anonymous sexual encounters. Here, again, the backdrop of Paris represents nothing short of freedom incarnate, not only because of the relaxed view towards promiscuity, but also because of the abundance of affordable prostitutes. Describing one streetwalker's genitals, he presumptuously boasts that that was the only part of her body through which she felt "a sense of connection, a sense of life. That was the only place where she experienced any life" (45). The sexual act represents the flow of currents that Miller places such a high importance on in *Cancer*. All characters' bodies in this book become part of a vast network of individuals connected by the marketplace of sex. Deleuze and Guattari cite a passage from *Cancer*, "I love everything that flows, even the menstrual flow that carries away the seed unfecund" (258), before elaborating on their philosophy of desiring machines, and how they all fit together: "a flow of spittle, a flow of sperm, shit, or urine that are produced by partial objects and constantly cut off by other partial objects which in turn produce other flows, interrupted by other partial objects" (*Anti-Oedipus* 5-6). In this way sex is portrayed as a desperate act of salvation in a cancerous and lousy world. On the other hand, however, sex is also a process that helps distribute disease, futility, and madness.

While sex is presented as a path towards creativity for the narrator, its destructive side effects are exemplified by his supporting cast of characters. Van Norden's obsessive preoccupation with "cunt" paralyzes him into complete inaction; Carl forgets all about his literary ambitions and drops everything in his life in order to follow his "rich cunt" (107), and Fillmore becomes trapped in domestic purgatory after

an unstable French woman holds him responsible for her (potentially imagined) pregnancy. In another case of defining himself as something that his friends are not, the narrator seems to be the only character who is immune to the destructiveness that sex-obsession brings about. He even praises the itchy, irritable diseases that come from contact with other bodies as containing a redeeming sense of connection with other humans: "We might never have known each other so intimately, Boris and I, had it not been for the lice" (1). On a mission to cure Fillmore's Russian princess of the clap, the narrator proclaims: "That's how one gets acquainted in Paris—genito-urinary friendships" (235). The physical is valued over the intellectual in terms of forging associations. It could be argued that Miller's condescension towards his friends' attitudes about sex—which becomes linked to their literary non-productivity—signifies a projection of his own views about himself. He was an unknown, penniless writer at the time, and must have been faced with the possibility that he would never "make it" as a writer. The caricatures he paints of the sexual shortcomings of his friends might have been a way to express how he feared his destiny would take shape, and as a way of railing against the more negative aspects of his own character.

Food, also, becomes of utmost importance, and works in conjunction with sex to represent the narrator's preoccupation with physical sustenance. Despite his insistence on the freedom that his complete lack of responsibility affords him, much of the book is spent thinking about where his next meal will come from. "'Life,' said Emerson, 'consists in what a man is thinking all day.' If that be so, then my life is nothing but a big intestine. I not only think about food all day, but I dream about it at night" (69). After a satisfying meal, just like after sex, Miller sees the world in an inspired light. If

there is a key to enlightenment, it lies in nourishing the body: "Miller invokes food and sex as heroic sentiments and even generalizes them into principles" (Rahv 30). *Cancer* is heavily loaded with the valuation of the physical blood-and-guts aspects of existence over more ephemeral and spiritual concepts. Even sprawling flights of philosophical diatribe are rooted in unflinching physicality: the sight of his Hindu friend Nanantee mistaking the bidet for a toilet sends Miller off on an existential rant which brings him to the realization that at "the last moment...there is nothing more, and nothing less, than two enormous lumps of shit" (97). For Miller, spirituality begins and ends with the physical imperative, and an active and satisfied body is one key towards creative illumination.

Paul John Eakin raises crucial ideas regarding the importance of bodily awareness to conceptions of self. He cites the 1905 case described by French neurologists Deny and Camus of Madame I, a woman who lost the awareness of her own body, and in the process lost any sense of her own self (*How* 10-11). She reported that without a body, she simply could not locate herself in space, and began to doubt her own existence. Eakin writes, "Her troubled condition reminds us that it is possession of a body image that anchors and sustains our sense of identity" (*How* 11). The dominant themes of sex and food in *Cancer* operate to reinforce Miller's sense of self as determined by his own physicality. The reassurance of clearly defined contours on individuals' own bodies reinforces the differences between themselves and others as separate and distinct entities. When loss of body image occurs, Eakin argues, a sense of where the body-less person ends and other bodies begin begins to dissolve.

Eakin uses blindness as an example of a condition that leads people to "lose" their bodies, and the sense of difference between themselves and their environments. He mentions blind children, and how their sense of self takes longer to develop than sighted children. He quotes Ulric Neisser, who writes that blind children "master the pronouns 'I' and 'you' much later than sighted children do" (Neisser, qtd. in Eakin, *How* 32). Not having a visual image of their own bodies makes it more difficult for them to locate precisely where they end, and other children begin. Eakin cites a book by John M. Hull, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*, where the author describes his experience of going blind in his late thirties. The book details his evolution from being a "normal" person who had lost his sight, to the time where he began to conceive of himself as a blind person. One of the most remarkable aspects of Hull's book is his feeling of the "dematerialization" of his own body. Hull writes how this process of decentralization of body image fundamentally affected his sense of self and non-self:

> [T]he fact that one can't glance down and see the reassuring continuity of one's own consciousness in the outlines of one's own body…So I am nothing but a pure consciousness, and if so, I could be anywhere. I am becoming ubiquitous; it no longer matters where I am. I am dissolving. I am no longer concentrated in a particular location, which would be symbolized by the integrity of my body.
>
> The archetype of blindness represents the power to obliterate the distinction between that which is known and that which is not known, that which is here and that which is not here, the inside and the outside, the specific and the general. It represents dissolution, the borderland between being and not-being. (64)

The process is frightening and life-shattering for Hull, as one would expect. But a more positive side effect of this loss of one sense steadily finds its way into Hull's perceptions. It is a commonly held belief that when people lose a sense, one or more of their other senses become heightened, although it is difficult for people who have not

experienced this first-hand to quite understand what that means. Hull describes an expansion of consciousness, which allows for a sense of connection with his environment: "At the extremities, sensations fade into consciousness. My body and the rain intermingle, and become one audio-tactile, three-dimensional universe, within which and throughout the whole of which lies my awareness" (133). This quote reminds us of the second level of consciousness, and heightened sense of awareness, that is necessary for all successful life writing. Indeed, it is precisely Hull's description of the effect that blindness had on his consciousness and its relationship to the outside world that makes his story so compelling and vital.

Although the narrator of *Cancer* doesn't lose his eyesight, the similarities in experience, even in vocabulary, to Hull's account and Miller's evolution are striking. First of all, Miller presents the world in which he is living as suffering from the same physical dissolution as Hull feels his body undergoing. Walking through the streets of Paris he feels "Everything around us is crumbling, crumbling" (19). The idea of an apocalypse is never far from his mind: "For a hundred years or more the world, *our* world, has been dying...But it needs the *coup de grâce*, it needs to be blown to smithereens" (26). Technology shares a large part of the blame for the breakdown of the physical world: "As the thermometer drops, the form of the world grows blurred...The wallpaper with which the men of science have covered the world of reality is falling to tatters" (165). What is left, after the world disappears, is but a void: "'In some ways,' says an eminent astronomer, 'the material universe appears to be passing away like a tale that is told, dissolving into nothingness like a vision'" (275). The world of *Cancer* is one that is literally coming apart at the seams, raising an interesting thinning of

boundaries between the book itself and the world in which it exists. Miller's long-time friend Michael Fraenkel describes the state of Europe circa 1930-31: "Our little world that the statesmen and politicians had put together with a paste and a pasteboard of words at Versailles was falling apart again" (51). Apolitical Miller would have claimed to be disinterested in such global conflicts, but he could not ignore the effect of the world falling apart on the faces that passed him in the streets of Paris. Speaking of citizens' reactions to the state of Europe at this time Fraenkel writes, "It left its mark on their bodies, their faces" (52). Fraenkel emphasizes the physical consequence of the state of the world at the beginning of the 1930's, and, it was precisely this dejected state of physicality that Miller picked up on.

Miller describes a physical breaking down of his own body that parallels the dissolution of the world around him. He seems to be suffering from a breaking down of physical boundaries similar to the one that Hull's blindness brings about. There are many references to the borders of his body evaporating, bringing a renewed sense of connection with the world around him. Again we see the importance of glass: "I had no clothes on and every pore of my body was a window and all the windows open and the light flooding my gizzards" (74). The process of losing touch with his finite self is beyond his realm of control:

> My whole being was responding to the dictates of an ambiance which it had never before experienced; that which I could call myself seemed to be contracting, condensing, shrinking from the stale, customary boundaries of the flesh whose perimeter knew only the modulations of the nerve ends. (95)

Sex repeats itself as one of the most prevalent metaphors of a loss of physical boundaries between self and other. Van Norden says:

> For one second like I obliterate myself. There's not even one me then...there's nothing...not even the cunt. It's like receiving communion...For a few seconds afterward I have a fine spiritual glow...and maybe it would continue that way indefinitely—how can you tell?—if it weren't for the fact that there's a woman beside you and then the douche bag and the water running...all those little details that make you desperately self-conscious, desperately lonely. (130)

For a second he feels the obliteration of himself, but it is the physical reality of his surroundings that snaps him out of his reverie and brings him back to the undeniable (and perhaps oppressive) sense of self. Sex becomes a physical act that has the power to allow one to move beyond physicality, into a more spiritual realm of pure consciousness. Van Norden finds out, however, that it is only a fleeting plane of enlightenment, and as the glow of orgasm wears off, he must surrender to the reality of this body lying next to his, and how he can most efficiently separate himself from it. Readers are forced to consider the extent to which Miller is once again expressing his own feelings through those of his friend.

What this loss of physical boundaries amounts to in *Cancer* is a blurring of the lines that separate interiority and exteriority. Miller emphasizes the way in which these two spaces can be reversed and confounded in the midst of this universe of fading boundaries. The final result of Miller's sense of bodily dissolution is a disarticulation in the differences between inside and outside:

> A fear of living separate, of staying born...They cut the umbilical cord, give you a slap on the ass, and presto! You're out in the world, adrift, a ship without a rudder....You grow eyes everywhere—in the armpits, between the lips, in the roots of your hair, on the soles of your feet. What is distant becomes near, what is near becomes distant. Inner-outer, a constant flux, a shedding of skins, a turning inside out. You drift around like that for years and years, until you find yourself in the dead center, and there you slowly rot, slowly crumble to pieces, get dispersed again. Only your name remains. (287)

We return here to the importance of the name, the one thing that remains after the body has disappeared, and the major link between the Henry Miller inside the book, and the Henry Miller of the outside world. The only thing to do is to celebrate the awareness that the world is turning itself inside out. Through the supraself's identification of itself as compared with similarities and differences from those surrounding it, the lines between self and other must be redrawn. Author, narrator, text, reader, characters and setting "collapse" into one organism; all elements are interconnected in fundamental and indefinable ways.

The author becomes a part of a vast machinery of bodies; stuck in an organism that has no beginning or end:

> There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species of life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.
>
> (Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus* 2)

The result of this process for the narrator of *Cancer* is one of illumination and creative inspiration. He welcomes the eruption of feeling that goes along with a muddling of his sense of being, and not-being:

> It's like a clean birth. Everything cut away. Separate, naked, alone. Bliss and agony simultaneously. Time on your hands. Each second weighing on you like a mountain. You drown in it. Deserts, seas, lakes, oceans. Time beating away like a meat ax. Nothingness. The world. The me and the not-me. (286)

This quote signifies the liberation that came with Miller's ability to get the contrasting models of himself to function in some kind of harmonic pattern. The last line is particularly important, as it says a great deal about his conception of himself in relation to the world around him. The profound sense of calm that he suddenly feels comes from

the realization that the "me" cannot exist without the "not-me," and that both of them are interdependent parts of one whole organism. This epiphany comes like a rebirth for Miller, with the umbilical cord cut away with a meat axe. He is thrown into a new frame of reference that allows him the ability to simultaneously examine conflicting ideas side by side: bliss and agony, drought and superfluence, nothingness and the world, the me and the not-me. With this rebirth comes a kind of death: "Miller buries the notion of a finite self" (Decker 60). Selves, he realizes, are in constant flux and can only flourish when not bound to any limiting definition. The identities he managed to create in his writing succeed in moving effortlessly across temporal, moral, personal, sexual and ontological boundaries. He becomes ubiquitous, recognizing everywhere his own face.

## The Line of Flight

The formlessness that the narrator's physical body adopts in *Cancer* is paralleled by the shapelessness of the text itself. The book functions with an "absence of plot, method or plan" (Goodwin 306), and with no definite centre around which all of the action revolves. It is subject to the frenetic movements of the author's roving consciousness. This is the nature of the spiral form as Miller described it, and as it was examined in detail by James M. Decker, and is another way in which *Cancer* anticipates the writing of Deleuze and Guattari: "The chaotic order of the novel is very much like a rhizome, a set of relations without a center...in constant movement" (Jensen 69). Recognizing the interconnected chaotic movements that drive the action can help us

appreciate how Miller was attempting to dissolve formal literary boundaries, in addition to physical ones. It becomes easy to see, through their writing style as well as numerous references to Miller throughout much of their work, how Deleuze and Guattari were influenced by Miller's alinear spiral form. Compare their description of a rhizome as "biunivocal relationships between successive circles" (*Thousand Plateaus* 5) with Miller's explanation of spiral form: "There is no progress: there is perpetual movement, displacement, which is circular, spiral, endless" (*Wisdom* 22). Both share the characteristic of successive spirality with no defined beginning or ending, branches and tangents repeating back on themselves, intertwined and dense.

As Miller the narrator feels new and inspiring ports of connection with the world around him, *Tropic of Cancer* assumes a more and more rhizomatic quality. He longs for a feeling of oneness with the world and the moment: "The great incestuous wish is to flow on, one with time, to merge the great image of the beyond with the here and now" (258). Getting there, of course, is never as easy as it sounds: "A fatuous suicidal wish that is constipated by words and paralyzed by thought" (258). Again, the decentralization of the narrator's physical body in space is paralleled by the centre-less narrative structure of the book. Another similarity presents itself: that of the narrator becoming entwined in a rhizome-like structure including himself, his friends, Paris, and the cosmos. The result is a kind of flexibility in character that forces the narrator to define himself largely in his relations with these other characters, or the city itself. These points of connection further blur the lines where Miller ends and everything else begins. Deleuze and Guattari write, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be…A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections"

(*Thousand Plateaus* 7). This sensation of becoming a growing cloud of consciousness, enveloping all the people and places around him seems to have reflected Miller's own artistic evolution during the period that he wrote *Cancer*. Friends described the creative explosion that occurred during this time: "He expanded in every direction: everything he did took on a new dimension" (Martin 72). Miller himself became drunk with the new flood of associations that he began to see everywhere: "Am thinking out in all directions at once—which is a good sign. Everything seems to connect. That means I'm centipetalized, or something" (*Nin and Miller* 68). Miller's creation of himself takes on more all-encompassing proportions; he finds an ever-increasing catalogue of people and events to add contrast and depth to the story of himself. The more connections he seems to make, the closer he gets to his own particular artistic vision of truth, and all that it implies.

The chaotic form of the novel also mirrors the dissolution of the world in which Miller the author and narrator both found themselves mired. Thus, new meaning is given to the phrase: "the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world" (Deleuze, *Thousand Plateaus* 11). The alinear movement of the book is meant to relay the feeling of living in Europe at this time, at the fragmentation and doom that Miller recognized in people's faces. Everything becomes connected on a plane of disorganization: [Miller's] life was chaos and the world was chaos, and he would reflect the chaos of his life and the chaos of the world" (Fraenkel 59). Miller's life, those of his friends, and the world he was surrounded by had lost any central backbone of organization, and this turbulence comes through in the way *Cancer* is structured, or unstructured. Disorder becomes the one constant that ties everything together: "The

world has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world...a book all the more total for being fragmented" (Deleuze, *Thousand Plateaus* 6). Demonstrating the chaos of the world, of which the book is a part, is another major way that *Cancer* blurs notions of interiority and exteriority. It manages to condense the boundaries between itself and the environment from which it was conceived, asserting fundamental connections between the two. Extending out in all directions at once, like Miller's infinite replications of himself, it becomes one more chaotic element in an already chaotic world.

The idea of the *line* is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of what Miller is attempting to accomplish in *Cancer*. In reference to a rhizome, it becomes easy to recognize the book as a series of lines intersecting and coming together in disorganized ways. The non-linearity of the narrative is one of the major facets that make it an example of a new kind of writing style, both for Miller and the literary landscape that he both valued and abhorred. An imprecise mess of lines is key to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome: "There are no points or positions in a rhizome...There are only lines" (*Thousand Plateaus* 8). This quote is quite interesting when examined alongside *Tropic of Cancer*, as the narrator assumes a kind of active passivity that keeps him disinterested in the affairs of the world, on a strictly political level. The narrator proudly asserts: "I'm neither for nor against. I'm neutral" (153). He yearns for a kind of return to the womb where the events of the world can be observed, but not participated in. In a similar refusal, Miller adopts an ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* his namesake narrator, he doesn't exist fully on either side of the fence, but adopts many different positions in between.

He and his friends can be seen as a series of interconnected lines, tangled amongst themselves, and stretching out beyond the page to the world outside.

Lines also remind us of the borders that are being broken down in the novel: truth/fiction, author/narrator, self/other, inside/outside. All divisions are breaking down, causing all things to affect each other in fundamental ways: "Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities" (*Thousand Plateaus* 9). The world of *Cancer* is a world of multiplicities falling away and melting into each other, changing each other, deterritorializing each other. Miller immediately tells us that "[t]he world is a cancer eating itself away" (2) and the image sets the tone for the entire novel: "a cell becomes cancerous, mad, proliferates and loses its configuration, takes over everything" (Deleuze, *Thousand Plateaus* 163). In a letter to Anaïs Nin, Miller makes reference to the astrological sign of Cancer, the crab, that can move in any direction, that than just in one straight line. At the end of the letter, he proclaims, "The line is only imaginary—there is no boundary line to reality" (*Nin and Miller* 147). The disappearance and reformulation of lines becomes a primary concern of the book; the tropic of cancer itself, being nothing more than an imaginary line. In the universe of *Cancer*, the boundary line dividing interiority and exteriority begins to fade away into near-invisibility.

**Becoming Nonentity**

The disappearance of clearly defined lines dividing selves leads the narrator towards a desire for imperceptibility. He seems to long for a sort of anonymity, a state of non-existence, or non-being. When remembering his difficult past with Mona, he proudly proclaims: "I am one who was lost in the crowd, whom the fizzing lights made dizzy, a zero who saw everything about him reduced to mockery" (250-51). This feeling of being invisible is a source of pride and redemption for the slightly defeated Miller in his New York days, being remembered by the more enlightened Miller of present Paris. Miller and his circle of friends all adopt the same everyman nickname, Joe, in order to maintain this liberating sense of non-identity: "Everybody is Joe because it's easier that way" (102). Many of the characters seems interchangeable at times, and seem to make up one network of being that only exists in concert with its other parts. We are reminded of Deleuze and Guattari's bodies without organs: "The subject itself is not at the center, which is occupied by the machine, but on the periphery, with no fixed identity, forever decentered, *defined* by the states through which it passes" (*Anti-Oedipus* 20). While *Cancer* is ultimately about the evolution of the narrator, he is not always at the centre of the action in the book, but often off to the side, describing the adventures of his friends and acquaintances. He tends to get lost in the action of these scenes, invisible and hard to locate. For all of his desire for recognition as a writer, Miller actually began writing *Cancer* with the intention of publishing it anonymously (Jong 94). The way he references his feelings about "The Last Book," which was one of the early titles of *Tropic of Cancer*, makes this explicit: "*The Last Book*—which is going to be written anonymously" (22). This emphasis on anonymity falls in line with the

narrator's attempt to blend into his surroundings, and find crucial points of correlation between inside and outside. It points to the greater wish for a passive state of non-definition that is hinted at during many episodes in the novel.

One important example of this desire for imperceptibility can be seen in the narrator's reverence for his Hindu friend, Nanantee, or Nonentity. He becomes saintly because of his ability to disappear: "NONENTITY! That's what we called him in New York—Nonentity. *Mister* Nonentity" (78). The idea of losing one's identity and evaporating into pure consciousness shows Miller's interest in Eastern philosophy and modes of thinking. It is also another one of the aspects of Miller's work that Deleuze and Guattari pick up on: "if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible" (*Thousand Plateaus* 171). Deleuze writes, "Miller's problem...how to unmake the face, by liberating in ourselves the questing heads which trace the lines of becoming...How to become imperceptible" (*Dialogues* 45-46). The striving towards imperceptibility becomes an important part of the process of Miller's growth into an artist. He moves towards pure consciousness, a freedom that is allowed by the dissolution of his physical boundaries, and one that again parallels the one experienced by Hull's evolution into a blind man. Miller articulated this wish for anonymity in a 1969 interview with Georges Belmont: "I'd like to be an ordinary man in my next life—a nobody, as we say in English—the opposite of a somebody...no one at all. Yes, if I ever return to this earth, I should like to be the humblest of men, an unknown, *who would be of no consequence*. That is my ideal" (*Face to Face* 103). This yearning to become unknown contradicts the complaint that Miller expressed in his letters written before the publication of *Cancer* that he was

nearing forty, and still unknown as a writer. Miller remains, however, a highly contradictory character, and it is not uncharacteristic for him to express a desire for fame and anonymity in the same breath. Indeed, it took the development and dissolution of his own self in *Tropic of Cancer* to assert his position as both a largely influential and widely dismissed (and banned) writer. The reactions to his work have been as varied and contradictory as the positions asserted within.

Tied in with this idea of imperceptibility is the longing for a return to the womb that runs through *Cancer*, putting into interesting perspective the narrator's active obsession with sex. For Miller, the world itself is a kind of womb, a place where human beings should feel free to live without fear of death, a place that signifies nothing short of life itself. Miller says of the womb: "It is the original chaos, the seat of creation itself. No man fully attains it. It is a condition of IS known neither to the foetus nor to the corpse. But it is known to the soul, and if it be unrealizable it is none the less true" (*Wisdom* 96-97). Rather than fighting against the fear of death, people need to give themselves up to a force that moves independently of action, one that is more powerful than determination. It is in this way that Miller celebrates the joy of passivity, and has "a wish to live within the womb of time without disturbing its process. One gets closer to the truth as he abandons the will, submitting to the flux of experience" (Hoffman 45). The Paris of *Tropic of Cancer* functions as a particularly sensitive and comfortable part of the world-as-womb, one in which it becomes easier for artists to surrender themselves to the bloody act of creation. Miller writes, "Paris is simply an obstetrical instrument that tears the living embryo from the womb and puts it in the incubator" (*Cancer* 29). There are numerous references to wombs in the book, as well as all sorts of characters

curled up in warm and cozy places: beds, "cunts," apolitical frames of mind, and jobs with limited responsibility. The point is hammered home on numerous occasions: "all freedom comes only with total surrender" (Jong 100). One's environment takes on renewed significance when we consider this idea that enlightenment comes with giving oneself up completely to surrounding influences. Miller tends to look favourably on the characters who give themselves up completely to exterior forces: prostitutes and artists, for example. The most important way to tie together all the disparate elements of life is to lie down before their utter incompatibility, and bask in friction that results from the push and pull of their frenetic movement.

**Connection**

What the narrator ultimately moves towards, and begins to feel near the end of the novel, is a sense of connection with the world around him. The breaking down of boundaries, a yearning for imperceptibility, and the perception of the world as a kind of womb, all point toward Miller expressing a moment of illumination as he is carried along the stream of living. This leads to the curious paragraph that closes out the novel: "The sun is setting. I feel this river flowing through me—its past, its ancient soil, the changing climate. The hills gently girdle about: its course is fixed" (318). The narrator at the end no longer struggles to fit the disparate elements of his existence into some kind of harmony; instead he celebrates the chaos that results from their disjunction. It is interesting to note that Miller, for the first time at the end of the novel, has a significant of money lining his pockets. At the beginning of the novel he expresses his sense of

freedom from having no job and no responsibility, yet the ultimate epiphanic sense of belonging to the world happens when he is flush. In any case, it is this feeling of connection that thrusts a simple but crucial truth onto him: "peace only comes to a mortal creature when he starts to see himself as part of the flow of creation" (Jong 115). He manages to free himself of the limitations of his physical body to the point where he resembles "a pure fluid in a free state, flowing without interruption" (Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus* 8). Most strikingly, in ceasing to struggle against the conflicting forces that were conspiring to keep him failing in his artistic efforts, he manages to pacify them. As a result, he reaches the deeper level of awareness that he needs in order to create: "The consciousness expands to embrace the apparently conflicting opposites" (*Wisdom* 99). Miller bridges the previously enormous gap between interiority and exteriority, a split that had caused him much wasted effort and innumerable false starts. Finally, he becomes able to move freely between the real and the fictive universes, through the heavy anchors of time, and in the spaces between himself and others. He manages to reveal himself on all levels simultaneously, and to bask, at least temporarily, in one prolonged moment of present illumination.

# Chapter Three

## Bridge: All These Selves

I began my investigation of autobiographical fiction with the goal of looking closely at the implications of having a narrator share the same name and similar biographical history as the author. It seemed to me (perhaps due to the current popularity of a form of life writing referred to as "creative non-fiction") that readers felt a greater sense of involvement in a text containing events they believe actually happened. While it may be difficult to quantify readers' sense of connection to life writing as opposed to fiction, my examination has nevertheless led me towards a deeper understanding of the relationship between life writing authors and their literary alter-egos. I believe that my cycle of autobiographical-fictional short stories, *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me*, touches upon many ideas concerning this relationship that I introduced in the first two chapters of my project. Looked at as a whole, the three chapters reveal a dense series of connections that are in constant flux in universes both inside and outside of works of autobiographical fiction.

The relative nature of authors' conceptions of themselves in literature is one idea that kept coming back in all the chapters of my project. Paul John Eakin's ideas on the importance of a body image in humans' impressions of themselves have been indispensable to my understanding of the mutability of selfhood. One quote stands out as particularly relevant: "*all* identity is relational" (Making Selves 43), because of how profoundly it expresses the position of both authors and narrators inside an environment that they are wholly dependent on for their malleable sense of selfhood. Autobiographical subjects' understanding of *who they are* becomes a contemplation of *who they are in relation to the world*, and the people and places that populate their surroundings.

I explored this idea at length in my discussion of Miller, observing how he defines himself in contrast with his surrounding cast of friends and acquaintances, and uses their dialogue to express his own ideas on identity and creativity. In addition, Miller's impression of the dissolution of his own physical body in space adds to the feeling of individuals without any finite beginnings or endings, seemingly intermingling and blending into each other. When in different characters' company, he adopts different versions of himself. On the genre of autobiographical fiction, Miller writes, "The being revealing himself does so on all levels simultaneously" (*Books* 169). The sense of connection he feels at the end of the novel appears to come, at least in part, from his ability to concurrently consider these multiple selves during one present moment of illumination. Epiphany comes not with the realization that he is whole, but that he is spliced into many pieces, a man cut in slices, and celebrating the energy that results form all of these parts bouncing off each other in seemingly chaotic ways.

The multitudinous nature of selfhood is the most relevant link, I believe, between *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me* and my examination of Miller's work. Throughout my cycle of stories, Jeff struggles with the shifting versions of himself that are constantly wrestling for prominence in his developing self-image. He adopts different attitudes and various personas, based mostly on his present environment. His sense of self comes about entirely from his relationship to other characters, and he tries to makes sense of the conflicting selves that exist simultaneously within him. His most profound weaknesses are illustrated in his impressions of his family. He concurrently fights against his genetic inheritance, while recognizing redeeming nuggets of wisdom in each of them. I attempted to give a feeling of the simultaneity of experience, and the

contrasting emotions that complicate the movement of life writing stories towards an ending that is as equally conflicted as it was at the beginning, or perhaps even more so. In trying to assume one kind of personality, or fighting against the subconscious pull of another, Jeff must finally admit that people don't always exist in such defined extremes. Rather than adopting one position, or another, he discovers instead that he is made of up varying degrees of points in between.

Over the course of my study of life writing theory alongside *Tropic of Cancer*, I have begun to consider the relationship between authors and their narrators in a more comprehensive way. Of particular importance to my argument is the idea that humans are made up of various versions of themselves that they lean on in different situations. For example, one person can simultaneously be a father, a son, a husband, a brother, a friend, a co-worker, a boss, an enemy, a fool, etc. Very often these selves work in conflict with each other. Being a functional human implies the ability to hold these contrasting selves together, and blending them into a somewhat harmonious self-image.

The process of writing all the parts of my thesis has led me to understand that a life writing narrator is not just another version of the author, but other *versions*. Authors exist in relation to their narrators in the same way they exist in relation to other versions of themselves, and narrators exist in relation to other versions of themselves, and authors exist in relation to other versions of the narrators' selves, and narrators exist in relation to other versions of the authors' selves, etc. Authors, narrators, and books, therefore, become related in incalculable and seemingly infinite ways: "The treadmill stretches away to infinitude" (*Cancer* 182). Here is where the rhizomatic nature of life writing becomes illuminating: "the book is not an image of the world. It forms a

rhizome with the world" (Deleuze, *Thousand Plateaus* 11). The multiplicity of selfhood, both for Miller and his narrator, is one aspect of the book that helps its pages come to life with such explosive energy. Miller manages to conflate interiority and exteriority, and in the process recognizes the relationship between all his selves in one present moment of awareness: "All these [selves] are real to him as, say, his own image in a mirror" (Spender 116). The simultaneous multiplicity of the narrator is one concept that I attempted to include in all of the stories in *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me*, something which I believe is a logical continuation to my discussion of *Tropic of Cancer*.

Finally, I believe that Miller's ability to see himself in other people and things is the most effective way that he conveys this multiplicity of selfhood. In a quote detailing his admiration for the photographer Brassaï, he outlines what he sees as the ultimate goal of the artist, something I feel Miller himself successfully achieves in *Tropic of Cancer*:

> The more the man detached from his view of life, from the objects and identities that make life, all intrusion of individual will and ego, the more readily and easily he entered into the multitudinous identities which ordinarily remain alien and closed to us. By depersonalizing himself, as it were, he was enabled to discover his personality everywhere in everything. (*Wisdom* 177)

The process of othering himself on the page opens the door for Miller to see his face reflected in everything and everyone around him. The result is a version of selfhood as diverse as his life experiences will allow. Deleuze and Guattari adopt Miller-esque gusto when expressing one of their ideas on how to make a rhizome, "Don't sow, grow offshoots! Don't be one or multiple, be multiplicities! Run lines, never plot a point! Speed turns the point into a line! Be quick, even when standing still!" (*Thousand*

*Plateaus* 24). Separating oneself from any singular point of view remains the key to tapping into the various identities that are essential for successful life writing. This remains a powerful statement on the relationship between artists, their creations, and the world, and was one of the strongest impressions I was left with from my investigation of Miller's work. *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me* is my own humble attempt to tap into some of the same revelations on the multitudinous and relational nature of selfhood that Miller so innovatively wrestled with in *Tropic of Cancer*.

# Chapter Four

## *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me*

**Who's Eating Who**

When I was four they took a piece of skin from my ass and put it on my face. I had shingles, which was apparently very rare for kids and practically unheard of on someone's face. My mom slept next to my hospital bed every night for two weeks, where they were afraid the shingles would spread into my eye. Doctors and specialists bent over me, trying to mute their surprise at the uniqueness of my condition, but even at four I could tell something strange was going on. I never went blind and what stands out most from my hospital stay was the feeling of the cold metal bedpan pressing against my thighs—it took a giant leap of faith to leave my hardened lessons of toilet training behind and let myself go into the shivery abyss that I had to trust was underneath me.

When my mom was pregnant with me she had chicken pox, which has nothing to do with chickens at all, but is just a fancy name for *varicella zoster*, which sounds more like pasta than an itchy children's disease. It was an extra-taxing gestation period, and all parties were relieved when I exited my mom with all the appropriate amount of digits and accessories. I had gotten the chicken pox too, *in utero*, and when I was later exposed to the virus, I got shingles instead. Shingles—*herpes zoster* (no thanks, I think I'll have the *varicella*)—is like the sequel to chicken pox. Chicken pox for old people, who usually develop the itchy, painful bumps on their backs or legs. The older you get the more painful it is, and fortunately for me the reverse is also true. I was left with a red bumpy scar mapping the left side of my face. They were going to write me up in the medical books, but instead they just glued pieces of ass to my face, which I guess is just

as good.

In a strange twist of fate, kids started telling me I looked like a chicken when I was in grade eight. Once one very influential and astute classmate first made the discovery, there was nothing I could do. When someone tells everyone you look like a chicken, you tend to believe them.

"How's the chicken?" my mom asked one night. It took me a few seconds to process her question, at first wondering how she had heard about my new nickname at school, then realizing she was talking about the dinner on my plate.

I looked down to find that I had cut a face—neither happy or sad, just a straight line for a mouth—into the breast, without even noticing.

"It's good," I said.

"I tried a new recipe." She was always trying new recipes that tasted exactly like all her other recipes. We were living a Shake n' Bake existence, with thousands of chickens losing limbs each year to feed my mother's insatiable appetite for *pulkes* and *gorgles*.

My older sister, Marcie, sat picking at her drumstick, barely making a dent in it. My mom complained that she ate like a bird.

"So we have to be at the hospital at 8 tomorrow morning," my mom reminded me.

"We'll leave at 7," my dad said.

It didn't take an hour to get to the hospital but there was no point in arguing with my father. He was hopelessly early for everything, but he had no patience. He would

always get really nervous and start picking at his skin or yelling at us when he inevitably had to wait for things to start. One of his great disappointments was that the world didn't move with the same reverence for prematurity as he did.

In grade four, Matthew Frankel started eating his prayer book. Not all at once, mind you, he didn't pull big chunks out of little plastic bags at recess and offer us a taste. During daily prayer time he pinched tiny pieces out of the pages and slowly lifted them to his mouth. As soon as Dave Lifshitz noticed him one day his life was basically over.

"Frankel's eating his *siddur*. Watch him. He's eating it."

All you had to do was look at the thing. Bumpy little indents ruffled the pages, giving it the air of an ancient, dog-eared document. It was pretty evenly chewed up throughout, there were no entire pages missing, and as of yet no actual words had been ingested. But it was getting close.

The scariest part about Frankel's new addiction was that it was unconscious. He didn't seem to be aware that he was within inches of eating the word of *Hashem*, he was just doing it, like standing.

They wheeled me into the operating room on a children's gurney, my feet hanging off the end. I asked the nurse if this wouldn't perhaps fuck up the procedure. The nurse laughed and said that I was a little big for the children's hospital, but she thought it would be fine.

The official story behind the scar was that the shingles had over-healed. "It's just

extra skin," Dr. Morris had told me. "Hey, better to over-heal than under-heal, ha!" That much was true, but I couldn't understand why the dermatologist had to frame this statement in the form of a joke. Give it to me straight, doctor—that was my attitiude. He was giving me straight man. Adults are weird, I figured.

Now, ten years after the shingles had attacked, after my original hospital stay, I was back. The scar never bothered me, and I didn't see the need for plastic surgery, but my parents seemed to think it was a good idea and I just wanted to make them happy. There were two little holes in the scar, craters according to my best friend Lifshitz, who called me crater-face for the first six months of our friendship. Eventually he got tired of the nickname or just forgot about it. The holes were the most noticeable part of the thing. The procedure, called Z-plasty—pronounced with the American Zee—was another one of those operations that must have been considered ingenious at the time, but seems pretty barbaric compared to our present age of lasers and other technological witchcraft. Dr. Morris was going to carve out a little Z in one of the holes, like Zorro in a white lab coat, and—zip—close the thing up. The whole procedure would only take an hour. The desired effect was a smooth, seamless surface, thereby rendering my scar half-invisible. I was just worried that it was going to hurt.

I asked the nurse when I was going to be put under—like kids getting tonsillectomies on TV, falling asleep before the doctor even got a chance to finish his story about the bunny rabbit who ate too much ice cream—but was flabbergasted to hear they would only be using a local anesthetic. What a rip off, I thought.

"But—won't I be able to see them working on me?" I pleaded.

"Just close your eyes sweetheart," the nurse said. "Besides, Dr. Morris is not

really that much to look at."

I hadn't considered it. For the life of me, I couldn't remember what he looked like. But that wasn't what worried me.

"I—I can't close my eyes. My dentist always complains I'm creeping him out."

I spent most of grade eight in the bathroom. After finishing my processed cheese and tomato sandwich I would have no place to be, no one to talk to and nothing to do. The greatest sin of high school would have been to get caught loitering in the lunchroom, looking around for friends you obviously didn't have. Every move had to be carefully measured and accounted for—there were no accidents. Rather than trying to expand my friend base, I just went to the third floor bathroom and hung out for the entire lunch hour. I could think of worse places to be.

O Frankel, why did you let yourself be consumed by such a bizarre and unacceptable addiction? Couldn't you just have eaten your boogers? That we could have forgiven. Come to think of it, I think you did eat your boogers. Still, you could have been one of the great ones, Frankel, flourishing at the top of the popularity pile instead of languishing among the dregs. There was a time when you ran with the big boys, and we had no reason to believe you wouldn't be our friend forever. We could have stood side by side in high school, hurling insults and footballs at each other, getting high in the Olympic Stadium, shitting in a bag and putting it on Brian Segal's car.

But you had to go and eat your *siddur*. Look at you now. Didn't you know we were watching, Matthew, that every pair of eyes including the teacher's was glued to

your ingestion of these exultations and lamentations? Was it worth it? Did it taste that good?

Dr. Morris crouched over me for an eternity. My face was totally frozen, but even removed from any pain I could feel his scalpel digging into me, shaking me like my desk when I was violently erasing something. Which is essentially what he was attempting, to erase my scar, or at least part of it. How far would he go, I wondered, moving past the scar and erasing my face altogether, to be replaced with a shimmery new blank surface.

I could only imagine his sadistic grin underneath his blue mask as he poked, scraped, picked, pricked and sewed my face. Still unable to close my eyes, I almost got my wish to pass out as I saw blood on his gloves, instruments, arm, the walls and the floor. I pictured a tidal wave of blood rushing down the hall like in The Shining, the rivers of Egypt filling with blood, *Dam*, plague number one, all the fish asphyxiating and the whole damn country smelling like cold-blooded rot.

Lying on the operating table between the familiarity of old Jeff, and the under-construction new Jeff I began to lose meaning, like a word repeated over and over again. I was approaching the negative ground zero of consciousness where you begin to question how you really look to other people, and if it has anything to do with how you think you look. I was helplessly gazing up at Dr. Morris, but I was simultaneously looking through his maniacal eyes right back at myself on the operating table, trying to imagine what I might look like without a scar, and if I would even look like anything at all.

I didn't mind being compared to the animal chicken but I wasn't so fond of being compared to the meat chicken. In my mind they were two completely different things. *Chickens*, I admired—chickens were punk rock, chickens were anti-style. *Chicken*, I didn't trust for a second. Chicken was a lack of imagination.

"What's wrong, you've hardly touched your food," my mother said a few days after the surgery, my face still tinged with Down Syndrome-like swelling. Something about the word *touched* made me think she was at least somewhat concerned about the chicken's feelings, too.

I looked like the loser in a lopsided heavyweight boxing match. I stayed home for a week, too embarrassed to even leave my room and head down to the dinner table. I forced my mother to slip the plate under my door like a prison guard.

I made elaborate plans to kill Dr. Morris, perhaps transforming myself into some freak-faced vigilante, punishing plastic surgeons for trying to play God and cram beauty into their narrow and petty definitions. With a Z on my chest I would move invisibly through city streets, a self-contained hobo making up his own rules, ensuring that the machinery of justice keeps its greasy gears turning. It was a heavy burden to bear, but—like all superheroes—there was no escaping the vacuous pull of fate.

Now Matthew Frankel is married and teaches Economics in a high school. His hockey team won their league championship. They took a team photo with the trophy minutes after winning it. The caption underneath reads: *The greatest moment of my life.*

I wonder what his wife thinks. I wonder what it would be like to win a championship.

Standing in my bathroom sanctuary I watched the metamorphosis slowly work its way over my body. My uncoordinated outfit transformed into grain-caked, yellow-brown plumage, and I allowed my head to flip-flop on my badly designed body. I shrunk down to miniature size, my mouth sharpening itself into a hard beak. Staring at my reflection in the glass I completed the mutation, folding my hands backwards on my hips and hop-clopping along the length of the bathroom barn. Fowl abandon swept through my body like a janitor's mop. It felt wonderfully transgressive. A few minutes more and I probably would have laid an egg.

I had been so absorbed in my performance I hadn't noticed Josh Goldman walking into the bathroom. Josh was, simply, the most popular kid in the history of all time. His chiseled good looks and impeccable fashion sense were advanced way beyond his years. He was like Johnny Depp and Brad Pitt's love child. Everything about him was in careful and irresistible order—from his perfectly messy hair to his perfectly worked-in shoes. Guys and girls alike couldn't help falling in love with this boy-man.

We knew each other in the way people who work at opposite ends of a medium-sized office have to know each other. Once he passed me the ball in floor hockey. I missed the net by three feet, but I was so flattered I couldn't sleep for three days.

I froze, mid-cluck, waiting for the pain.

After the swelling went down my scar looked more or less the same as before. You had to look really carefully to recognize Dr. Morris' work, and even then I wasn't

sure I could tell.

Nobody in school noticed the difference, or—more annoyingly—that I had even been gone for an entire week. What a rip-off, I thought. I had half-expected people to at least compliment me that I looked good, that there was something different about me, even if they couldn't put their finger on it. I was planning to tell them I had been in Florida for the week, tanning and recharging the batteries. *Wow, you really look alive*, they'd tell me before offering me a seat at the popular lunch table.

"Are you ok?" Goldman asked. Even his question was way cooler than anything I could have thought of, ever.

"Oh, I'm fine. Just—checking something."

"It looked like you were imitating a chicken." Despite the mortification, I was flattered that my impression had been true.

"Chicken? No. I was just—washing my hands." I showed him my hands, as if that would explain everything.

We locked eyes in the mirror, waiting for something to happen. An earthquake would have been nice, or a fire alarm. I tried to maintain an air of cool, but my insides were slowly dissolving. I became suddenly aware of my scar, my confused hair, unstylish clothes, everything. Tears welled up behind my flushed face. Curling my emotions into a fetal ball, I prepared for the complete disfigurement of my reputation. I deserved it.

I'm not sure if what happened instead was better of worse.

Goldman didn't say another word, but wrapped the back of his hands on his hips and began clucking and shuffling over to the urinal. His movements were swollen with grace, and his cawing came out like a beautiful chirp. If I was a mangy hen, then he was Queen Sussex, flaunting her immaculate plumage for all her subjects to worship. I might have been jealous if I hadn't been so transfixed by his sparkling performance. It was timeless. I watched him hop and twitch his way to the pisser, while the refrain chugged like a train through my head, *it's not fair, it's not fair*.

**Sinking In**

Brandy remained hopelessly devoted to Sex Pillow. She could have had her pick of any cushion on the sofa. They were all the same. Her monogamy, *their* monogamy, baffled me.

Every time we went into the basement we'd see it flopped into another corner, contorted into uncomfortable positions. Sex Pillow got around more than anyone else in our house, except for Brandy, who got around exactly as much.

Once Brandy got hold of Sex Pillow it was never touched by human hands again, until after she died when my mom threw it away, presumably. Me and my brother and my sister were unreasonably afraid of it, imagining the veil of dog spunk permeating from its cracked skin to its plushy insides would melt our fingers if we went anywhere near it. Eventually we just stopped going down to the basement altogether. We'd crank up the TV anytime we heard squeals of canine ecstasy coming from below. Afterwards, randy Brandy would hop up the stairs, tail a-wagging, and everyone would act as if

nothing had happened.

For me, the lesson was clear. True love may be possible—if only between pets and furniture—but nobody really wants to hear about it.

Apparently nobody wants to smell it either. Especially not if it smells like skunk. And not the driving-by-on-the-side-of-the-highway smell, the quaint weed-like perfume of the skunk from far, but the up-close gasoline nostril burn. An actual three-dimensional smell. A smell like death, but a little worse.

We needed to hire a company that specialized in dead body smells. Walking inside for the first time, the guy said "wow, never seen anything like this before," by which I assume he meant he'd never smelled anything like this before. A flitter of self-importance skipped over me before I remembered that this wasn't actually a good thing.

"Jeff, I'm afraid of you," Hanna admitted one night weeks before at the Bifteck Bar. I liked to believe she meant she was afraid of trading in our dramatic friendship for something even more dramatic, romantic, and potentially fling-y. I hoped she wasn't afraid I would become obsessed and start stalking her. She was never clear.

"I'm afraid of you too," I responded, desperate for any kind of mutual feelings, no matter how vague.

A dozen metal bracelets clanked against the table as she picked up her glass of beer. Her other hand combed through her nest of gnatty bleached-blonde hair. She was naturally blonde, but for some reason felt the need to over-blondify her hair to near-whiteness.

"If we were ever not friends I'd die, immediately," she admitted before taking a sip.

"Me too," I said. It really annoyed me when all I could do was agree with her, but that was all I could do.

"Jeff, I love you," she said. She had repeated this to me so many times that it came to mean little more than *pass the salt*.

"I love you too." *Here you go*.

Pitcher number four came and went. The urinals of the Bifteck were soaked with muttering frustration.

We were terrified of some esoteric love-ideal but we had no problem jumping into my car however many litres of beer later and driving back to her parents' place, to right outside her parents' place where we'd fumble over each other in the wildly uncomfortable too-small cabin. The threat of a car accident paled in comparison to what might have happened had Hanna ever actually invited me inside her house, and down into her basement bedroom. After a few dozen minutes of making out—where we'd never go further than a cramped hand going down the front of one of our jeans—she'd stumble out the car towards her front door. Looking at her walk away I'd curse our heartbreaking scenario—caught in the inertia of being constantly on the verge of love, but never quite getting there. The no man's land between friendship and whatever lay on the other side. Driving back to my place was a blur of calculating how much farther or closer the night had brought us to being together. It was an algorithm that Steven Hawking would have been hard pressed to figure out. I'm lucky I never got killed on the ride home.

Hanna was a sculptor. She spent her days surrounded by cold, grey lumps of wet clay. Her workshop was dripping with the stuff, it crawled up the walls and rained from the ceiling. When she worked, clay splattered her face and clothes, covering her like a second layer of skin. Watching her, it was hard to tell where she ended and her creations began.

We both discovered our artistic leanings at around the same time, and we shared our life-or-death plans for the future alongside our fears of inadequacy. She was the first one I read my stories to, and I was the first who got to hear her epic explanations for the nuances of her work.

"Y'see these ripples here, they're like a clam shell but if you look at them from this angle they almost look like ribs—which is cool because this isn't supposed to be a man—a person—it's not supposed to be anything—it's abstract—abstract with ribs—like a southwestern restaurant fucking ribs I think are the grossest thing in the world, when you think about them—but they're fucking good—you like ribs?—"

It went on. Even words couldn't keep up with her.

The more time we spent together the more I began to fall apart. I ached for her—woke up every morning and fantasized about her three times. Thought about her when I was in class and when I skipped class to go see movies. Dreamt about her when I managed to still my heart enough for sleep. Poured her into my glass and downed every last drop.

But the *we can't get together because we can't risk our friendship* refrain was too tragic to hold on to. It could have gone on for the rest of our lives. I started to consider the real possibility that Hanna just didn't like me. Surprisingly the thought started to make me feel better about things, like our whole mess of an excuse of a disclaimer made some sense.

And then disaster struck.

It's extremely deflating when you realize that your parents were on to something when they warned you that running out and getting drunk every night was probably not all that hot an idea. Things like that always come out of left field, like, say, a skunk coming up and spraying your dog when you let her out in the backyard at four in the morning. Precisely after one of those drunken and disappointing nights, particularly gutting because with my parents out of town for the weekend I had convinced myself that the stage was set for me and Hanna to bring things to that elusive next physical level.

I was extra-incosolable on the blurry drive home from her place. My steering wheel bore the brunt of my frustration, getting hit so hard the airbag almost popped. Sitting at a red light and yelling *FUCK FUCK ME* at the top of my lungs, the car next to me must have thought I was having a heated argument with my radio. Even that would have been more productive. At nineteen every drop of disappointment hits you sledgehammer-hard—like the end of the world, but a little bit sharper.

Brandy getting sprayed by a skunk was the last thing in the world I felt like dealing with, so I didn't. I let her assume her nighttime position under my parent's bed,

shut my bedroom door and went to sleep.

I began to recognize my fatal error in judgement at L'Equipeur, the clothes store I worked at, the next day. Co-workers and customers were avoiding me all afternoon, something I took as a blessing as it allowed me to wander aimlessly through the aisles, unfolding and re-folding pairs of jeans. I almost made it through the entire day before I looked up from my useless work and saw one of my co-workers standing a few feet away from me, looking completely horrified. She gave it to me plain as a white-collared golf shirt, "Jeff, you stink."

Yes, I stunk. Stunk like skunk. I hadn't noticed until then that the world didn't smell as uniquely terrible as I did on that Sunday afternoon.

A few hours and several cans of tomato juice later, Brandy trotted out of the bathroom radish-pink and dreadlocked, but the damage had already been done. The house was effectively ruined from Brandy running around rubbing her tainted forehead over every square inch of carpet and furniture in the house for the previous twelve hours. I sat in the middle of the skunk-dredged house and waited for the sound of the garage door opening, effectively signalling the end of the world as I knew it.

When your dad calls you a retard enough times, you start to believe it.

"I still don't understand how this happened," my mother persisted.

"Because I'm a fucking RETARD, I told you." I was bawling, the hysterics of my parents co-mingling with my own to create a brand of super-hysterics. The potential for violence hung in the smelly, smelly air.

"But, how could you do this?" she always had to *know*, everything.

"FUUUUCCKKK. I'm SORRY!"

"An accident? What kind of fucking accident is this?" my dad yelled.

Adoption, selling me to gypsies, murder—nothing was ruled out at this point.

"What do you want me to do? We'll fucking clean it up that's all," I blubbered, realizing this would only make it worse.

"*We*? Are you kidding me? I'm not cleaning this mess—" my mom shouted. She didn't realize she was already spraying carpet deodorant all over everywhere.

"FINE! Shit. I'll clean it." I walked over to the cleaning closet.

"Where are you going?" My dad screamed at me. "Come back here, I'm not done with you—"

After a couple hours of letting my dad's abuses rain down on me and watching my mother run around insanely vacuuming everything in the house, I had to get out. I told my parents I was going to the library and retreated to the safe zone of the Bifteck. We were all exhausted from shouting.

"What are you wearing?" Hanna asked after I told her what had happened.

I had to dig into the deepest corner of my closet to find the thing that smelled least. It was an oversized purple sweatshirt which had *SOMEONE IN DEERFIELD LOVES ME* printed across the chest. I had mysteriously acquired it on a trip to Florida years earlier. Unfortunately, even the weakest smelling article of clothing I owned still managed to overtake the entire bar. This was a problem I clearly couldn't escape from.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do." For all our intimacy, Hanna seemed like the wrong person to be speaking to. I was only able to give her half the story—the what,

without the all-important why. The compounded hurt grew exponentially with the dual failures of the previous evening. It was like having your cake, eating it, and then simultaneously vomiting and contracting Hepatitis.

"It'll go away," she promised. "You don't smell that bad."

"That's sweet Hanna, but I know I reek."

"Ya, well, I tried," she said and laughed. "Well—Jeff—you'll know for next time."

"I don't think they'll be a next time," I told her. It was a bad situation, and my negativity was only making things more impossible. I knew it, but there was no other way to get the words out.

Somehow, I managed to convince the insurance adjustor that it was all the skunk's fault. It isn't easy making someone believe that you're the biggest idiot in the world so they'll give you twenty-thousand dollars because you are, in fact, slightly more idiotic than you make yourself out to be. Miraculously, I pulled it off, telling him that I had cleaned Brandy right away, but it was already too late. Perhaps Leonard King was, in fact, stupider than I was. Anyway, my bullshit performance offered me a measure of redemption in my parent's eyes. I can only imagine what Leonard's boss said to him when he got back to the office. Everyone's got their own problems.

Out for dinner some ten years earlier, I asked my parents why the dog could pee on the carpet and I couldn't.

"We don't *let* her pee on the carpet," my mom responded. "She just does it."

Her answer made sense, but the full weight of it didn't hit me until we got home and I peed on the carpet. To me, it was the funniest thing ever. To my mom, who had to clean it up, and my dad who had to listen to her complain about cleaning it up, it was severely disturbing.

"Are you retarded?" my dad asked, sincerely.

"Why would you *do* that?" my mom wanted to know, as if understanding would make her scrubbing job easier.

"I thought it was funny."

"What's wrong with you?"

I was always holding it in, I figured just once I could get away with letting go. Mostly, I felt dumb for believing that this joke would go over well. I liked to think I learned something from that night, but it was obvious that some things take a long time to sink in.

## Don Juans & Dragons

Apparently, I was going to need some kind of code name. Scrolling through the already chosen monikers on *DonJuan.com*, I could see that this was going to take careful consideration. Longmember, Chromefister, Shame, Needles, Dr. Blaine—this was obviously a refined bunch of gentlemen. I needed to come up with something that highlighted not only my thinly-veiled misogynist leanings, but also let one know immediately that I was the kind of pervert who could walk in both worlds—the boys club and bedroom. This is fun, I thought. I have always adored choosing aliases for

myself, although they've usually been rock n' roll nicknames—and this felt like a whole different ball game.

Not to say that these aspiring Casanova's didn't find their whole "secret" community to be very rock n' roll. It's just that it wasn't, so far as I could tell. The drugs and rock n' roll elements were essentially removed, and all that was left was the gaping void in these former Dungeons and Dragons addicts' lives: SEX. But rather than the sadistic pleasure and glorious pain that spices all of our lives with fodder for our wacky neuroses, the Chromefisters and Needles of the world had dedicated their entire waking lives to the pursuit of the act of copulation—that one redemptive moment of ejaculative *how ya doin'*—which unfortunately seemed to avoid them like some rare, as yet undiagnosed, disease.

We had always thought Steve was gay, so his sudden interest in self-improvement, no matter how shady, was cause for optimism. My older brother had never brought any girls home to meet the family, nor ever spoke of any females that he was dating or fucking or even friends with. The question was constantly put to me at family functions by second cousins and great aunts: is Steve—*gay*?—the last word always whispered with the same volume of fear usually reserved for *cancer*, a condition that was far less embarrassing for family members to admit to.

I always answered *I don't know*, and I didn't. Steve never had, after all, brought any guys home for dinner. He didn't have a lisp, wear rainbow-coloured accessories or come home early in the morning smelling of poppers. We have never had one of those brother relationships where you talked about girls, or sex, or anything really besides

music and hockey. I almost wished my brother would come out of the closet, fearing a much more sinister affliction—asexuality.

Signs began to drop that perhaps my extended family had been right about him. He started to become heavily into fashion. His apartment was unreasonably neat. I was astonished to discover that he waxed his chest. Or shaved it. Sitting in the park one sunny Sunday afternoon he ripped off his T-shirt and the reflection beating off his chest near blinded me. I couldn't look straight at him. At *it*. I could almost see my reflection in its gleam. I wondered what other parts of him were clean-shaven, then quickly shuddered the thought out of my mind.

The mystery of my brother's sexuality consumed me. I couldn't come out and ask him, and scouring all the gay clubs and dating web sites seemed like too much work, so I just decided to spend more time with him. I showed up at his apartment unannounced a few times a week.

"Steve! I had to get out of the house. Wanna watch the game?"

"There' s no game tonight."

"Oh. Play chess?"

To my disappointment I didn't walk in on him and another waxy-chested dude wrapped in towels, feeding each other grapes and Brie. Nor did I find him with, say, a conventionally unpretty and unslim girl arguing about a Green curry recipe. He was always alone, cleaning or watching wrestling tapes. It was infuriating.

Turned out the new clothes, obsessive cleanliness and war against his own body hair were part of a much more campy pseudo-sexual lifestyle than the relative banality

of gayness. All the extra time spent with my brother paid off in his full disclosure about his newfound group of friends and heroes.

"It's powerful stuff," he told me one day over coffee. I had never seen him so excited about anything. "Anyone can become a master of seduction. All it takes is practice."

"Practice what?" I asked.

"This guy Dozer," he went on, "was a famous journalist, he hung out with rock stars and porn stars, and he was a zero with women. He got heavily into this shit, and now he's the world's number one pick-up artist."

"Yes, but what does that *mean*?" I asked, skeptical about the integrity of this ranking system.

"Powerful, powerful stuff," Steve elaborated while blowing on his coffee, lost in Dozer's rags to pussy story, shining proof that he too could one day be regarded by those who cared as the world's number one pick-up artist.

I was happy Steve was *at least theoretically* interested in sex, and the fact that he was heterosexual was a bonus, I guess. But I feared none of the thousands of dollars and hours he was investing in souping-up his character was going to get him any bona fide, three-dimensional pussy. Never one to miss out on an easy shortcut to love, though, I figured there was no reason that studying these unlikely ass-wrangling folk-tales couldn't work for *me*.

I settled on the name Vessel. It sounded like what an Orthodox father would name his sixth son—*Label, Shloime, Pinny, Nachman, Avrum, and—what's that kid's name*

*again—Vessel, get over here!* With their reckless driving and black suits, I found the Orthodox distinctly badass.

My brother had long been dubbed Osmosis. I told him it sounded more like a sound poet than a pick-up artist. He respectfully disagreed.

Vessel and Osmosis went out armed with pockets full of canned conversation—opening lines, contact initiators, attraction builders, closers—we could have had an entire exchange from start to finish without the burden of another human on the other end of the table.

Our super-tight clothes stuck to us like wet newspaper, and we were pitted in a two-metre wide orbit of cologne. Once inside the bar—in the field—we were ready for action. We were over-ready. All that was left was to pick our targets, and use all our Jedi training to lower their defences, not to mention their panties. We were drunk with the redemptive possibility of choice.

Choice—simultaneously *a range of possibilities* and *of very good quality*, the act of diving under the surface and coming up with the most choice choice—was something our father never had very much of. No kid dreams of being a real estate agent, yet it's not an altogether infrequent career, and if it hasn't brought my dad illumination or wild ecstatic joy, well, very few jobs do. Being the oldest kid, the pressure from his parents to find a job weighed like an ocean on top of him.

A job, and a wife. And while my dad may have had several unimportant jobs before getting licensed, I very much doubt he played any position on the field besides the one next to my mom before getting married. Nagging weight from above had to be

the only reason why he picked her, I figured, never having seen him throw any signs of affection her way besides the occasional insult. Stress caused him to compulsively pick at the skin on his hands, leaving them bloody and scabbed like a fresh tattoo.

"Vessel, over there," my brother said, pointing to a couple of girls sitting a few tables down. Amongst ourselves we were supposed to use our code names, though when approaching we were allowed to use our real names. It was like reverse acting, hard.

"Hey," I said, sitting down next to our marks. "Can you guys help us out, we were trying to think of the names of the five oceans, but we can't remember the fifth—" It was The Five Oceans Routine, and I found it absolutely dreadful, if slightly effective.

"Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Artic, and—"

Nobody ever remembered the fifth. Some people said Antarctic, while others insisted there were only four. It didn't matter, we didn't know what it was called and weren't even sure there were five, but we always pretended we were. We had more than enough tangents ready to dive off into should we sense the whole thing drowning in boredom or unoriginality.

"So, how's your social life?" my mom asked over dinner.

"I'm not dating anyone mom, I'll let you know when I am."

She always feigned innocence, assuring me that that wasn't what she meant.

Unlike my dad, my mom was hopelessly sociable. She would walk up to anyone in The Cavendish Mall if she felt there was a sale at Eaton's that they weren't doing

enough to advertise. As a kid I would tug on her arm as she engaged in endless chats with the women of The Mall, some of them all-too-happy to reciprocate my mother's nosiness, others—like me—trying to get away as quickly as possible without anyone getting a Chinese burn on their consciousness.

Once me and my brother had gotten to a certain age, these shopping tête-à-têtes assumed an altogether different texture for our poor mother. Not only was she forced to endure questions from the Mall Girls about when we were going to get married, but also boasts of their own children's successful cure to that miserable affliction, bachelorhood. They were terrible, these ladies, waving their pride around like long cocks in front of them, projecting a smug superiority not unlike that of the seduction masters my brother so blindly followed. For all her social savvy, she was not immune to these sharp defamations of her performance as a mother, leading her sons from the suckling dependence of infancy to the fuckling dependence of husbandry.

Our experiments dragged on, without any success. I was having the same middling results I'd always had, but at least before I had found *myself* amusing. Repeating the same canned material night after night was taking its toll.

After a short while, the Five Oceans Routine sunk to the bottom of our repertoire. We ended up meeting a bunch of girls who had just been asked the same question by another couple of guys dressed in near-identical clothing and similar smelling cologne as we were. It may even have been us, we couldn't remember.

"How's your brother, we never see him," my mom asked.

"Steve's fine."

"What's he so busy with all the time?"

"I don't know."

"Is he seeing anybody?"

Words couldn't do justice to the full story, so I gave her the abridged version.

"Not that I know of."

I was only three-quarters of the way through my chicken breast, but my dad was already wolfing down his dessert. He's always had a strictly functional relationship with food.

"Oh, Jeff, did I tell you Brenda's daughter's getting married?"

"No."

"Ya, she met him on *Harmony E*, or whatever. Here, I have his picture here—"

"Why do you have his picture?"

"It's on the engagement party invitation." She handed me the postcard size invitation. There was a picture of the two of them, arm in arm, alongside a close up of the ring on her finger.

"Pretty classy, eh?" my dad said.

"Looks like he could be her father."

"She said he's thirty-eight."

I looked closer at the picture.

"Ya, and I'm only twelve," my dad said. He took the last bite of his danish and headed to the living room to watch TV.

I decided to retire Vessel, and work full-time under my birth name. Steve took my rejection of his newfound religion pretty hard, and we ended up spending less and less time together. He had very little time for people who weren't entirely committed to his world.

Putting myself back together again wasn't as straightforward as I had thought. Humpty Dumpty syndrome. Staring at myself in the bathroom mirror, I was having trouble recognizing the charming zero that used to live there. Vessel didn't disappear so easily into the vacuum of memory, but he wasn't alone. Looked at from the lucid light of an attempted personality makeover, I lost track of my more concrete features. Being part of a family is one of the hardest things to get over.

About a year later I was happy to hear Steve was still plugging away it, looking for the pot of love at the bottom of the black-and-white rainbow of loneliness.

Our cousin Brian had become my brother's new running mate. Cousin Brian was a natural with women, understanding the nuances and textures of libidinal success without needing to immerse himself in a vat of theoretical sludge. He was the complete opposite of us. He was the real thing. His report on my brother's recent dalliances came completely out of left field.

Apparently Steve had been dating a black stripper. I couldn't believe it. My brother was five-six, and I immediately conjured up images of him being dwarfed by a leggy skyscraper of a woman, not to mention a woman with the toughness required to thrive in the hyper-tough universe of lap dances and tittie shots. I wasn't sure which side of the fence this news landed on—success or failure. I was both jealous and

confused.

"Turns out he likes the same thing we do," Brian mused, referring to our family's decade-old conjecture about Steve's orientation. There was something about his statement, especially the word *we*, that both creeped me out and made me proud that Brian considered *me* to be part of whatever *he* was.

Apparently cousin Brian's use of the word *dating* had been a little premature. When I asked my brother about the stripper he told me he had arranged to meet her one night after work, but she stood him up. Another sure thing down the drain.

"I was so pissed at her. I have another date with her next weekend—so—we'll see what happens."

Steve was one of those people with the rare ability to believe every one of his own words.

Still, I can't get the image of him tackling a 6-and-a-half-foot-tall exotic dancer out of my head. Who knows, maybe they'll fall in love and live happily ever after. Adorable mulatto kids running around a carpeted suburban house. I smile when I think how redemptive it would be for him to bring her to our parents' house for dinner one evening. One can always dream, and it's best to go large.

## The Sawasdee House

"I have sex wit Falang for money," she said.

I had totally forgotten that the first second I saw Noi earlier in the night I had her pegged as a prostitute. Now, a couple of hours before my flight, she felt the sudden need to confess. We were sitting in the dark purple glow of the Sawasdee House. Despite the open-air design the bar was thick with smoke. Somehow the smell of people flopped on cushions all around us managed to cut through the fumes. The girl with the mole and her droopy friend were impervious to Noi's declaration.

Hours earlier, she had come running up to me on Kaosarn road, something I took as an obvious sign she was working. This notion disappeared the moment she opened her mouth and began sobbing about how her Australian boyfriend had just left her.

"How long were you together?" I asked, curious.

"Five days."

"Oh, gimme a break."

I could never figure Bangkok girls out. The ones that hang around Kaosarn road sleep with tons of travellers, developing these week-long romances, before invariably falling in love with them. No doubt dreaming of finding one hard up enough to bring them back to Canada or England. You think they'd be a little more strategic about it, though. English teachers and ex-pats on extended stays do exist, but locating them among this obnoxious mob must be like extracting the peanut shards from a plate of Pad Thai.

From what I could tell Bangkok girls are made up of the most confusing mix of street smarts and naiveté. Truth is, I never hung around long enough to really understand them. I could tell teenage prostitution was a huge problem but I don't think I

ever fully appreciated how bad it was for *all* the girls there. My experience with my own part-time Thai girlfriend, Pai, left me with more questions than answers. She was *like* a prostitute, except she never asked me for money, and I never gave her any. Sure, I bought her food and drinks, but I couldn't imagine she was fucking me just to get some noodles and a Chang Beer. Maybe she was, but her emotional attachment only complicated what was becoming a more and more disturbing peek into the lives of these sad smiling creatures.

After spending six months in India—with its hordes of *shanti* dudes on *shanti* meditation retreats—landing in Bangkok was a sip of beer after a long and extended sobriety. If spending half a year stoned out of my mind could be called sobriety. I'd had enough of drugs and sitting around staring at beautiful scenery while throngs of Israeli travellers went on and on about the conflicting stories regarding Monkey-God Hanuman's birth. Blue-faced effeminate deities were charming at first, but now my body was starved for drink and nightlife. Alcohol, bars and girls in tight clothing—I had near-forgotten that such things existed. My travelling buddy, Ron, hit the nail on the head when we stepped out of the airport bus onto the circus of the tourist district.

"If I can't get laid here I'm a fucking retard."

Kaosarn road reeked of sex. It seemed like minutes (but was probably more like hours, or a day) before we both had Bangkok girlfriends hanging off our arms. Pai was older than us, slightly weathered-looking and charmingly funny. The way the word *man* hung off the end of her sentences like a drunk friend hanging off the closest shoulder. *Another game of table soccer Jep, you take back man, back, I want to score man.* Ron's girl, Phon, was closer to our age, early twenties, and just a diamond of a woman, movie

star gorgeous. In every picture I have from Bangkok Ron has an enormous smile plastered across his face. Mine was thinner and a little more guarded. They thought we were brothers with our near-shaved heads and post-India refugee-style boniness. It seemed ridiculous to us. Ron's skin is about fourteen shades darker than mine. We don't even look like we come from the same side of the planet.

Pai and Phon just picked us up on the street. Money was never brought up, so it never occurred to us that they were whores. Or if they were, they were giving it to us for free. We felt like the coolest guys in Thailand.

Of course pretty much every other *Falang* there also had a Thai woman holding his hand. But we were pretty sure *they* were paying for it. Commercial relationships were one thing—but these girls *liked* us. The first night we tried to bring them back to the Peachtree Hostel we were told that Thai girls were not allowed on the premises. Alcohol and my six-month dry spell percolated like vinegar and baking soda inside me. I began yelling at the girl at the counter. What kind of racist bullshit was this? I tried to figure out a way to tell her these girls weren't whores, they were our girlfriends, but I was at a loss. We indignantly took our backpacks out of their crappy rooms and settled into the raunchy luxury of the fabulously named Nakorn Pink.

With TV's, air-conditioning and showers in every room, all for a mere 40 baht more than our original place, the Nakorn Pink had it all. And there was no worry in bringing our newfound Thai loves with us. This, as far as I was concerned, was class. We hung out with Pai and Phon every night at the street bar they worked at, although I never saw them working. As nice as it was to be getting attention from a local lady, I was almost as happy to be hanging out with them and their girlfriends on an equal plane,

unlike the hordes of backpackers who simply tolerated them as part of the scenery. The help. A country full of housekeepers. I adopted a superior attitude to these wandering foreigners. Smugness was a blanket I cuddled up to when the potential for my own greatness was threatened. It was just easier that way.

After that first visit, I left for Taiwan to become an elementary school English teacher. Taking frequent vacations back to Thailand, I was in and out of Bangkok a few times over the following months. I hooked up with Pai whenever I did—three day pockets here and there—but I was beginning to sour on the whole thing. Bangkok is the biggest travel hub on earth and crawling with sexual opportunity. The idea of a local girlfriend began to lose its charm. As much as I hated to check out of the Nakorn Pink, Pai had to go.

I told her I liked her as a friend and enjoyed seeing her when I came into Bangkok, but didn't want to be her boyfriend. Anymore. I naïvely assumed that our flimsy friendship was more important to her than our even flimsier physical connection. I naïvely assumed that it was important for me, too. She lay on the bed, crying.

"Oh come on Pai. You can't pretend to be so hurt by this." She didn't say anything. "Shit, say something!" She didn't, and I just went to sleep. We spent the next day together—I had no one else to hang out with—and she just looked so sad. It made no sense to me.

Of course when I saw her making out with a lanky English guy in fisherman pants later that night I was terribly jealous. Who's the naïve one.

When I returned to Thailand for a weekend before coming back to Montreal I didn't bother calling her. I vaguely hoped I would run into her—Bangkok is an impossibly enormous city, but the tourist area is small and cramped—yet managed not to. I had a one night stand with another girl, who—I discovered in the morning after wishing her "morning" and being greeted by a frightened blank stare—didn't speak a word of English. In my hung-over bleariness it finally dawned on me that I didn't remember her actually responding to anything I said the night before. Phon had introduced me to her friend, also named Phon, at a bar and it was just assumed right away that we would sleep together that night. I was somewhat aware that the witty comments I was laying on her were unnecessary, but I didn't realise they were disappearing into the air like a fart in a noisy and smoky bar. I carelessly put my clothes on and tiptoed backwards out of the room. She lay on the bed and continued to stare at me, head cocked, like she was wondering what the hell I *was*, and how I had managed to get into her room.

At two o'clock on my last night in Asia I left the street bar to take one final walk up Kaosarn road. I had been away from Montreal for a year and a half, and the prospect of going home left me a slightly off-balance. I was already pretty hammered, and a little disoriented after one of my Thai friends force-fed me locusts, a local delicacy. Chewing on three pieces of strong gum, I couldn't get the raunchy fried taste out of me. I had barely turned the corner onto Kaosarn road when a petite, shirt-skirted woman began screaming at me from across the street. I did my best to ignore her but before I could take a couple of steps she was already walking beside me.

"Hello, hello."

"Hello."

"Can I walk wit you?"

"If you want."

"I need someone be nice to me."

"Uh huh."

This seemed like a stock pick up line, but I noticed she was crying.

"Are you OK?"

"No. My boyfriend leave me. Him Australian."

That's when she laid her whole heartbreak trip on me. It was pathetic. I tried to make her understand that she couldn't have been in love with this asshole after five days. She insisted that her life was over. I don't know why I didn't just tell her to fuck off. We walked up the street together, and I followed her to her hotel room.

"You so nice, you stay wit me."

Sitting on her bed I remembered my original intention for taking a last look around town, and leaned towards her. Her head was pointed down and she probably didn't see me coming. She didn't react one way or the other when I pressed my lips up against hers. We kissed, briefly, dryly, emotionlessly. I straightened up.

"Well, fuck it. I have to leave in the morning. Let's go out."

She took me to an after-hours place that had bad art on the walls, and bad English teachers standing around. We sat down on a couch, Noi to one side of me, and a South African dude on the other.

"This place is awesome," he assured me. "You don't get paid that well, but you can't beat the life here." His smile was brimming with overconfidence. I told him I had been teaching in Taiwan for the past few months and he felt compelled to share his professional opinion with me. It was the same traveller code that made everyone unnaturally curious to *where you been* and *where you going* and *oh man, Luang Prabang, I was just there, it's awesome!* No matter if it was the dirtiest, smelliest, and most boring spot in Asia, if the guy you're talking had just been there, *you have to go.* Noi sat to me left, still sobbing. I split my time between chatting with the South African and trying to appease her ridiculous crying.

"You're not a child, for Christ's sake. Grow up!"

"But I love he so much—"

As I tried to cheer Noi up, I became more and more drunk and miserable. The party was loud, crowded and I was pretty sure everyone was on coke because they were all talking at the same time. I don't know how long I spent on that couch drying her tears, but when we walked outside I realised I had an hour before my airport bus. Time for one last drink.

We went to the Sawasdee (welcome) House. The place was open all night and loads of travellers waiting for buses or trains were crashed out on the pillows, not wanting to spring for a hotel. We sat down with a couple of Noi's friends, a girl and a guy with a saggy, tired face. I ordered a margarita and a round of drinks. Ron had always instructed me to exchange just enough money to last until I leave whatever country I'm in. Having any foreign currency left over was just bad form. I couldn't think of anything better to spend my last baht on.

At this point I was too drunk, and unlike people who become exuberantly outgoing when smashed, I start to mutter really benign comments. I recognized one of Noi's friends as one of the T-shirt saleswomen who worked on the street. She had an unforgettable mole on her cheek.

"Hey, you sell T-shirts on the street!"

She looked at me like I had revealed some horrible family secret.

"No, no me."

"Yeah, I recognize you!" I blurted, as if recognizing someone is some amazing feat.

That's when Noi felt the need to confess that she'd been selling *herself* on the street. Her statement came completely out of nowhere. Her friends didn't notice. Maybe they did, and figured it wasn't something that demanded a response. Or maybe they weren't her friends.

It was the saddest thing I had ever heard anyone say. The statement, but more the *way* she said it, like someone had been trying to beat it out of her all night and she was just too tired to deny it anymore. I had totally forgotten that it had been my first impression of her when she came running up to me hours before. Her skin was chaffed from crying.

"I have to go," I said. "The airport bus."

"I come wit you, Jep."

"No, you no come wit me."

"Yes, you so nice wit me. I come to airport, wait wit you."

"No, Noi, I have to go"

I made it back to The Peachtree just as they were opening the gate. It was six AM and the sun was coming up for another bright, oppressively hot day. We exchanged emails as some kind of parting formality. The whole way back to the hotel she thanked me—for what I had no idea—and told me how good I was.

"Not like most Falang. You have big heart."

She gave me a big hug and watched me disappear under the gate. I appreciated her words but I felt like complete shit. I felt like I was dying.

Standing in the check in-line at Suvarnabhumi airport I broke down and started weeping. I wasn't sure if it was the fact I was going home, Noi's sad story, or the alcohol. Everyone in line was freshly showered and matinal. People believed that it was better to travel clean. I knew it didn't matter.

Arriving at the gate I saw a girl from Toronto that I had met on Ko Phan Gan.

"You *reek* like alcohol," she informed me. Judging by her expression I figured I looked like an unflushed turd.

"Yeah. I'm drunk," was all I could muster. My face was purple from crying.

"Rough night?"

I told her about everything, about Noi, about Pai, about Phon, about the South African guy and the girl with the mole. I told her about every bad thing I had ever done in my life—or as much as I could remember—and I thought there's nothing better in the world than the patience of strangers. I could see the relief in her eyes when the plane started boarding.

**Braving the Waters**

If only my mom had walked in on me masturbating I might have been spared all the unnecessary embarrassment. Floating in Century Village's Sector 7-B pool, I was thinking about the first time she busted me. From my raft, I considered the sign on the cabana door: *No Splash Zone*. Sandpaper-skinned residents shot me piercing glares—they weren't used to having young people around, plotting waves. Even swimming was frowned upon in The Village. Octogenarians glided through the water with saggy breast-strokes and three-legged doggy paddles, propelled only by the momentum from the earth's rotation.

Even in this retirement paradise the memory of that night made me cringe. The squeak of the doorknob had forced me leap up from my kneeling position, and there was no way to hide my guilt, standing by the side of my made bed, shirt tucked in, *kippah* in hand. My mom blinked hard. I was just standing, like I was waiting for a bus.

"Were you *praying*?" she asked, the last word uttered with a where-have-I-gone-wrong inflection.

I told her no, I was just neatening up, and— what did she want? Had she ever heard of knocking?

It was no use. Nobody knew better than she did that I never cleaned my room.

I could feel the old people's eyes all over me. They were waiting for me to do something illegal so they could kick me out of the pool. I was also nervous, but for a different reason. Six days into my two-week Florida vacation and I was running out of places to sneak off to and get my prayer on. The pool locker room, my grandmother's

condo basement, the little-used Village photo lab— all my secret shrines were becoming compromised. My mother was on to me, and if she found out I had brought my little prayer act south, there would be painful consequences.

She had raised me to be a good Jewish boy in the *I hope you marry a nice Jewish girl* sense of the word, and my nightly devotions to *Hashem* veered a little too close to religious fanaticism for her liking. Besides, kneeling nightly at your bed and praying to The Lord is not a particularly Hebraic thing to do. I had gotten the idea from sitcoms.

Like with television, I ended up becoming hopelessly addicted to these spiritual nightcaps. Not even the threat of my mother's intrusions could keep me from doing it, night after night. I was terrified that missing even one session would result in an arm falling off, or my face transforming into sudden ugliness. It was obvious that God and my mother would eventually have to duke it out in a Battle Royale over control of my independence. Despite all my faith, I had my money on mom.

All of my ritualistic mumbo jumbo couldn't save me from getting a man-o-war bite on my genitals.

Deerfield beach is basically Century Village North. It was crammed with residents crammed into bathing suits they had no business owning anymore. As opposed to this barrage of over-bulging bubbies and zaidas, my swim trunks were four sizes too huge. I didn't mind looking like a featherweight in heavyweight shorts, but it wasn't by design. I had complained to my mom before we left that I couldn't find my bathing suit. She promised we'd "get" a new pair once we got there. Naively, I assumed she meant we would buy one, but it was obvious that she had deftly acquired

these giant blue shorts from one of my grandmother's allies inside Century Village.

All my underwear for the first ten years of my life had been given to me by strangers. My mother would fill my drawer with them and many mornings I was left scratching my head wondering if I had ever seen this pair before, and how the hell it had managed to find its way into my room. They all had name tags in them—looking inside a "new" pair I would search for the fortune-cookie strip hiding in one of the seams, anxious to see whose discarded underwear I would be sporting that day. Michael Wolfson, Craig Cyrus, Markus Iandago, Bruce Davids—my underwear drawer was like an inner-city public school attendance sheet. *Who is my mother getting these things from?* I wondered. After I was done with them they no doubt made their way to the next kid in line. I imagined a vast network of kids sporting strange underthings, a black market underwear economy. My mother denied everything.

I would occasionally sign my homework or force people to call me by the name riding up my ass. For those days I *became* whoever's underwear I was wearing, adopting a whole new set of mannerisms, tics and way of speaking. Transforming daily into someone else was very liberating. Freed from the shackles of Jeff-hood, I could become whatever I wanted—the spoiled son of an Italian mob boss, a Greek restaurant heir, a retarded math-whiz, basketball star, or the first kid in the class to start smoking. Other kids were impressed by my unpredictability, while teachers grew very tired of my over-acting. My accents were cartoonish, at best. They were the kind of portraits that children find hilarious and adults find infuriating. After a while I became addicted to these extreme personality shifts, I started performing them unconsciously. Being "myself" would have made the burden of sporting a foreign pair of tighty-whities too

much to bear.

I was swimming for about two minutes before I felt the blast. Too shocked to scream, I thumbed open the useless waistband and checked for damages. It was still there, thank God, and whatever had taken a chomp of my member had swum out the other side of my trunks, to digest his meal unmolested. The pain wound itself into a near-paralyzing crescendo and I must have looked like a sea monster, stumbling out of the ocean, thumbing the waistband of my shorts so as to not let the lacy under-webbing come into contact with my stinging wound.

"Jeffrey, what happened?" My mother asked, sensing my discomfort from across the beach.

"Something bit my—," there was something so pathetic about saying the word to my mom, like admitting I had gotten an F on a math test. "Penis."

My mom sprung into action. Everything she had worked so hard all her life for was suddenly put into question. Grabbing my hand we made our way across the street to the fire station. I offered token resistance to my mom's pulling. I figured she knew best, but really, what were fireman going to do?

My dad trailed behind. As with such embarrassing things as genital issues or shopping, I didn't want him around.

"It's OK, dad, you don't have to come," I winced behind my sandy grimace. I'm sure he would have liked to, but some kind of duty towards my mom forced him with us. I couldn't tell if he was more concerned or amused.

The firemen were definitely amused. Nine years old and sitting shivering naked in

a huge fire station sink, while the high-powered tap flushed ice-cold water over the wound, I was sure I wouldn't make it through the afternoon. "A man-o-war bite," deduced the fireman. "Never seen one on someone's—thing—though, before. You should wear a suit that fits better." The one dealing with us put up a nice front of remaining neutral, but I could see his whole ladder having a good laugh in the cafeteria. Ten minutes into the trauma, and the pain was getting worse. My mom held tightly on to my hand—both comforting and embarrassing—while I sat like a baby in that sink. My dad and the fireman looked at me with reassuring glances, but I saw them lock eyes a few times and wince. Cock injuries hurt everybody universally. All you have to do is hear about a kick-in-the-balls story and the nausea sets in. I wished I would just pass out.

"That was one smart man-o-war," my grandmother remarked. "Good taste." Back under our beach umbrella, the pain subsiding under the caress of Tylenol, it was apparently okay for jokes. I missed the embarrassed respect of the fire chief.

"Yeah, it's true," my mom chuckled. "Jeffrey, you made a girlfriend in Florida!"

My family started laughing while I sat wrapped in a pink and white towel, vowing to never come back to Florida as long as I lived.

That evening I knelt in the middle of an empty field on the outskirts of Century Village. The pain had mostly worn off and I prepared myself for prayer. A sharp wind whipped gravelly dust into my eyes and sky was steadily greying. After nearly a week

of ducking into the most impervious locales in The Village I was tired of looking for secret spots. I figured nothing worse could possibly happen to me that day.

Becoming absorbed in my ceremonial mumblings, I didn't hear her until she was right behind me.

"It's no use," the voice fell from the sky, crackly and thin. "God don't come round here no more."

I opened my eyes and turned around. A woman in her eighties stood smoking a cigarette. She was thrown together like a thrift-shop hurricane, with cobalt eyelids and skim-milk teeth.

"Uh—what?" I asked, nonplussed.

"You're wasting your time, kid," she said, taking a dramatic pull on her smoke, "You can kiss as much ass you want. Those words won't help you in this place." She swept her wrinkled hand around in a careful demi-circle, like a retired Barker's Beauty showing off a new convertible. I wasn't sure if she meant Century Village, or the world.

My instinct told me to get up and get the hell out of there, before this lady started asking questions. The last thing I needed was for this to come back to my grandmother, and, by effect, my mom. I thought about making a break for it. There was no way she'd be able to keep up. Yet I remained frozen in my kneeling position.

"Ok," was all I could say. "Thank you."

I don't remember what I expected to happen next. Her mouth contorted into a shape that could have been a smile, or a yawn, or just a meaningless tic. Then she turned and walked away. I watched her disappear into the condo-maze horizon, worried

she might get toppled by the rolling gusts. When I was certain she was gone I closed my eyes and resumed praying.

Shifting my weight, I was hit with a sharp twang from below. Lightning flashed and I felt a drop on my eye-lid. I thought about skipping the routine for one day, due to injury. The words were starting to lose their meaning, anyway. Instead I started again from the beginning. I wanted to make sure I didn't leave anything out.

# Conclusion: Life Writing in 2008

The study of theory relating to life writing, as well as its application to autobiographical texts, seems particularly appropriate to current literary trends. At the moment, memoirs and personal essays have grown into some of the most popular, and in some cases the most innovative, writing being produced. The development of theoretical concepts relating to life writing has stood alongside advances in various styles of autobiography in continuing to change the way in which the genre is perceived. It is encouraging to imagine that the interplay between these critical and primary texts have pushed autobiographical literature into new and exciting territories.

During the composition of *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me* I have attempted to keep up to date on as much contemporary autobiographical writing as I could. The influence of many present-day life writers in my work is something that I am consciously aware of. David Sedaris and David Rakoff are two writers who have been particularly inspirational to me. They are worth mentioning because they are two of the most influential—and in my opinion two of the best (and funniest)—autobiographical writers working today. I believe I have learned as much about life writing from these and other contemporary writers as I have from the substantial amount of life writing theory I have studied over the past year. Looked at from the other direction, I'm positive that my immersion in these theoretical concepts has allowed me to appreciate and understand these works on a more profound and instructive level.

It is significant that Sedaris and Rakoff's (and many other contemporary life writers') books are classified as collections of essays. It could be argued that the form in which they are working owes as much to the short story as the essay. Their classification as essays, however, manages to secure them a place on the non-fiction

shelf, and raises important questions on the nature of truth versus fiction similar to the ones I explored throughout my thesis. This idea becomes even more interesting when we consider that James Olney highlights Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* as one of the first works that anticipates what he classifies as modern-day autobiography. Olney goes as far as devoting a whole chapter to Montaigne in his seminal 1972 book *Metaphors of Self*, in which he first expounds his philosophy of autobiography. He writes:

> Montaigne, of course, is timeless. But if we could fix him in an age, then it would be as reasonable to call him our contemporary as to confine him to the limits of the sixteenth century where we cannot get at him. (*Metaphors* 67)

The popularization of the autobiographical essay has come full circle. From the first writer to label his work as such, to the latest, essays have proven to be a form that manages to strike resonant chords with a wide variety of readers.

As a more recent example, I believe that certain innovations brought about by Henry Miller have allowed for the blossoming of a lot of the autobiographical writing we see today. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine the influence that Henry Miller's work must have had, directly or indirectly, on the authors mentioned above—in terms of attitude, freedom of expression, humour, stylistic gusto, and—perhaps most importantly, the growing acceptance that oneself and one's own experiences in the world are viable subjects to write about. The freedom that Miller experienced from the decision that himself and his life were the most suitable topics to write about is acutely contagious, especially to those whose work consists of constantly searching for a good place to start.

I have attempted to pay homage to some of the conceptual preoccupations of present-day life writing in *Someone in Deerfield Loves Me* as a way of following up on

the more theoretical and critical component of my thesis. The stories that I have included here are part of a larger project that I intend to turn into either a collection of stories or a novel. Thinking about these stories in relation to the theoretical component of my thesis has allowed me to have a more thorough grasp on them. Keeping the idea of the multifarious nature of selfhood in the foreground has added a vital facet to the work. This element would not exist in the same capacity were I not forced to consider these theoretical implications.

If I were to pursue a PhD degree, I would consider continuing this critical project by conducting a thorough investigation of how life writing has evolved throughout the twentieth century to lead us to the current slate of autobiographical writing. Reading autobiographical texts that have been written within the last few years, I have discovered many interesting ways that they manage to fit into a larger tradition of life writing. I have also remarked crucial innovations that are being introduced into the genre. It would be interesting to probe further into how contemporary life writers fit into the autobiographical tradition that has been shaped by a large variety of modern writers, Henry Miller included.

Another point of interest could be to look at why now, perhaps more than ever, readers and audiences seem to be more interested in "real-life" stories than fictional ones. This is by no means a new phenomenon, but it does seem to be one important cultural attribute of the late-twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries. One approach could be to examine this idea through a viewpoint of cultural studies, alongside the exploding popularity of such artifacts as reality television and documentary filmmaking. It would be intriguing to consider the role that various forms of autobiography has

played in this cultural and social evolution.

As a parting statement, I hope that the writing in both the critical and auto-fictional components of my thesis have managed to bolster ideas contained in each. At times, I have been tempted to think that my creative work exists in a universe that is somewhat independent of theoretical rigour. After my experience of composing this project, however, I would consider such an attitude to be a disservice to my own imagination. Like the borders between autobiography and fiction, those between theory and art are not always so clearly pronounced. In the same way, I believe it would be equally irresponsible to study theoretical texts without considering how they touch and affect works of art. It is with a firm consideration of both that the study of literature can continue to churn out original ideas, new perspectives, and fresh ways of thinking.

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